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Eigner's Scores

By Stephen Ratcliffe

In Larry Eigner's poems, words and spaces (on the page) present and represent time and space (in the world). His poems are physical "events," bodies whose parts (typed) "count": as lines recording (imagining) perceptions, division between lines the passage of time —

the force

crash of a car

accordion

streetlights

dimmer than day

they were burning all night

stars

it's raining

— the displacement of words a notational register of (f)acts, as if language ("here" [on the page]) could mark (map) geographic location:

in the shadow

cross

winds

sunlight

as if over "there," elsewhere.

One doesn't commonly find "I" in Larry Eigner, though plenty of "eye": — what sees what's around one being in his case primary. This

Stephen Ratcliffe's recent books are *Sculpture* (Littoral Books) and *Present Tense* (The Figures). *SOUND / (system)* is forthcoming from Sun & Moon.

is not because Eigner, who sat in his wheelchair and typed his poems with one (right index) finger, has no dramatic emotional "story" to tell, as one might think. Rather, his interior life and dreams (re)play out—in or as or over—the day's events, as if to say *DOWN ON THE BED you/ can't/ imagine/ enough*, the fact of what takes place in absolutely present time being of continual interest to one who had his presence of attention (focus) to track it. And with that act of what amounts to a record of time's inexorable "passage," Eigner's mental and emotional (and physical) life transcribed itself into these shapes:

the

frosted car

I imagine

hearing the motor

of the girl who lives here

or next door

upstairs

now

the snow heavy

hours

such days

that's it

news

what

drives away

the world

Where words move in falling (dropping) from top left margin down (across) the otherwise blank page takes one by surprise — that of knowing suddenly the next thought ("that's it/news/ what/ drives away/ the world") may not be around forever.

There's a register of quiddity ("thisness," fact) as precisely as

language can gauge it, where position (of words) and the rhythm of successive instances of that set down (record, invent, discover) all that may be pertinent. Being an eye has its point too, given that it can see—

open road

you look in houses

and the night sky

any place

is all one

this time

—mind attend. His poems are literally “meditations.”

To read Eigner’s poems on the page, one is confronted with the fact of “it”: poem as object, the two-dimensional plane of the page a field in which words play themselves out, making sound:

another plane is

gas far, a lot, the night

shadows too

the fish tank bubbles

everything stand

continue shapes

To hear Eigner’s poems read aloud in his own voice (inaccessible to most listeners, those at least not used to his speaking habit) is to come face to face with the power of words to convey sense by sound (alone). For if one could not “understand” Eigner speaking his poems—could not make out what the words are—one nonetheless heard what is essential: pace, tone, pitch, pause, silence read (pronounced) according to the poem’s (page’s) direction. Given that each person who speaks is a fraction of the world’s community of speakers, in terms of numbers (this street, neighborhood, town, county, region), there is always the possibility that one will not be “understood.” Eigner’s poems (scores) represent in notational form the sounds of a voice which otherwise would not be heard. What is heard, according to

the poem’s directions for reading it, is a record of what is seen (perception), shaped not only to remember and preserve but to enact and imagine “it” into existence:

the sound

sea through the horizon

under the stand of trees

it comes by on the wind

flat and round

earth and sky

Knowing the moment in such terms, one is conscious: something is alive, it exists, is blessed.

flock of birds

a moment

of one tree reached

apples fall to the ground

Passages in italics are from Larry Eigner’s *WATERS/ PLACES/ A TIME* (Black Sparrow Press, 1983).

Paragram as is Hypertext

By William Marsh

Loss Pequeño Glazier (*Witz* 4.2¹) argues for a broader sense of hypertextuality that both pre- and post-dates the emergence of the personal computer. Citing numerous examples of what could be called 'pre-PC hypertext' (William Burrough's "cut-up" experiments, the footnote-laden works of William Carlos Williams and Jack Spicer, and the serial poetry of Olson, Duncan and Blaser, to name just a few), Glazier clarifies that "until the process of standardization in print codified present conventions," book writing often involved the use of various ordering mechanisms (marginalia, quotations, bibliographical apparatuses, footnotes, end notes, etc.) which today would seem foreign to the "definitive format of the book" as we have come to understand it (19). Implied here is the idea that pre-PC hypertext claims a more extensive history than the postPC variety, and that quite simply "hypertextuality" offers a parallel terminology by which the ordering (and disordering) mechanisms of print text can be identified and challenged, especially in the arena of experimental poetics. In other words, experiments with the "internal orders" of printed text (typography, calligraphy, pagination, annotation) can and should be recognized as 'hypertextual features' in the print environment.

Glazier goes on to clarify that "online space" offers a similar venue for such experimentation, and is careful to point out that recent explorations in the form of online journals, multimedia CDs and new electronic poetry sites are "literary developments—developments in writing inseparable from the medium which transmits them" (22). The online environment, in which the term "hypertext" is most

¹ "Towards a Theory of the Net: 'Our Words Were the Form We Entered'" in *Witz*, Volume Four, Number 2, Summer 1996, pp. 15-29. All parenthetical page citations refer to this article.

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often used, thus offers a parallel venue for a literary practice already hypertextual in nature. "Literary materials may pose the most exciting possibilities of any field because of the *complex and associative relations* within texts that have become evident even in the print medium" (emphasis added) (23).

In view of these "complex and associative relations" inherent in both electronic and printed texts, it is helpful to recall the "paragram" as a term which, alongside "hypertext," conveys an approach to writing committed to the exploration of the "internal orders" of textuality. The term appears quite often in the work of Julia Kristeva, who following Saussure's use of "anagram" in relation to the dissemination of sounds and letters throughout a poem, posits a "paragrammatic conception" of poetic language by which the literary text is seen as a "network of connections." In a "dialogism of paragrams," Kristeva argues, syntactical and grammatical laws are "transgressed" even as they remain implicit to the text. This transgression "announces the *ambivalence* of the poetic paragram," an ambivalence which derives from a "coexistence of monologic (scientific, historic, descriptive) discourse and a discourse destroying this monologism."² In the Kristevan model, then, any work which explores the "internal orders" of print text as described above could be described as a "paragrammatic" text whose ambivalence lies in its functioning as both *text* (linear and monological) and *hyper-text* (tabular, spatial and dialogical). Such an equation would perhaps oversimplify the dynamics of both the paragram and the hypertext; nonetheless, it is clear that both terms describe an engagement in language which foregrounds the "beyond" of textuality.

Elsewhere Kristeva defines the paragram as a "moving gram" ("*gramme mouvant*")³ and so brings us closer to a literal sense of the term as suggested by its etymology—"beside-" or "beyond-letter"⁴—which proves useful with regard to the "hyperlink" in web-based writ-

² Kristeva, Julia. "Pour Une Sémiologie des Paragrammes," in *Recherches Pour Une Sémanalyse*, 1966, pp. 174-207. Translations from the French by the author.

³ Kristeva, p.184.

⁴ The dictionary definition of paragram, "a pun made by changing the letters of a word, especially the initial letter," seems clearly limited given Kristeva's and others use of the term to suggest a wider understanding. I'm thinking also of Steve McCaffery's discussion of the work of bpNichol ("The

ing. In the two prefixes “para” and “hyper” we find a common meaning (“beyond”). As regards the latter, Glazier reminds us that “hyper” is an appropriate prefix for the Internet, especially given the excessive, even “manic” behavior of the industry in recent years. “And think of contemporary uses of the prefix: hyperacidic, hyperactive, hyperbolic, and hyperexcitable are all relatively familiar uses of the term. These varied terms lead to the conclusion that ‘hyper’ is associated with extremism, manic activity, and *disorder*. Hypertext can thus be seen as being *disordered* by hyperlinks, destroying classification by the innate hyperactivity of its imbedded links.”

But this “disorder” involves more than just the “outer order” of Internet market hyperactivity. “The disorder extends to words themselves” and to the electronic environment in which web-based writing occurs. A word, as a “link word,” is “forever changed,” ac-

Martyrology as Paragram,” in *North of Intention*, pp. 58-76) in which McCaffery identifies the “paragrammatic function” in Nichol’s work as “that of the remotivation of the single letter as an agent of semantic redistribution.” Arguing for Nichol’s insistence upon the “complex transphenomenality in *all* writing” (an “inevitable condition of words existing within words”), McCaffery negotiates a reading of *The Martyrology* via close attention to “the word’s local aspects (sound, letter and space)” and thereby centers his study of poetic paragram in the *material* dimensions of the text. I refer the reader to this essay for a thorough demonstration of McCaffery’s application of the term.

For now, it’s interesting to note that while elsewhere McCaffery has described the paragram (Interview, *Witz* 1.2) as a “non-perceptible” or “non-intentional disposition” within the written, “outside of conscious intentionality,” clearly the work of bpNichol (and others for whom attention to the word’s “local aspects” is central to praxis) suggests an *intentional* and *conscious* engagement with language qua paragram, as even McCaffery implies in his analysis. Any hope for a clear, singular understanding of the term (and its application as a practice in writing) is further problematized by the fact that “paragram” is listed in the opening sentence of McCaffery’s essay (along with pun, homophony, palindrome, anagram and charade) as one of the “ludic features of *The Martyrology*” on which he will base his reading of the text as “Paragram.” In other words, since Kristeva, and particularly in McCaffery, the term has undergone an *accretion* of meaning by which it signifies both a specific practice (or device, even, like pun or charade) in the poem’s composition and a general index in the poem’s semantic economy. For two reasons then (simplicity, and accuracy, given the seemingly *mobile* nature of a term also signifying word mobility), Kristeva’s definition proves most helpful to the current discussion.

cording to Glazier, in that the “action the word performs, or is capable of performing, changes the word irrevocably.” In Kristeva’s sense of the paragram as “moving gram,” however, we find an interest in the mobility of words which suggests that rather than being “forever changed” once it assumes the “status” of a link word, the word in fact stays exactly the same (as hyperlink) insofar as it functions paragrammatically in the “network of connections” comprising the hypertext. In other words, the hyperlink represents the latest mode in which poetic language functions paragrammatically.⁵ It could even be said that the “hyperlink,” viewed in the context of poetic paragram, affords us a look at the word (the ~~(un)~~changed word) as “hypergram” —

⁵ If the word does change, perhaps it changes only in that same sense in which our view of the *text* has changed in the age of hypertext literacy, specifically with regard to those works exercising the liberty to format “beyond” the limitations of conventional print publications (i.e., pre-PC hypertexts). In brief, our view of the word is perhaps *different* in light of the point-and-click experience of the hyperlink. Note as well the way in which the now-familiar term “hypertext” is used here [in Glazier’s article as well as this response] to manage a rather diverse selection of writings and writers. In addition, Glazier (20) blocks off a large section of Charles Bernstein’s “Artifice of Absorption” in which Bernstein offers as examples of writers practicing “hypertext avant le PC” a group which includes Blake, Dickinson, Oppen, Stein, Howe, Hejninian, Cage, Beckett and several others. Bernstein concludes his eclectic list by suggesting that anything fragmentary, serial or digressive would classify as pre-PC hypertext. Obviously, it could be argued that the term ‘hypertext’ is simply over-applied, generalizing a diverse body of work to the point that the term loses any of its original distinction. Furthermore, I’d suggest that these kinds of generous uses of the term testify to a patent revision of textuality (inspired by recent enthusiasms surrounding computer innovations) to *involve* hypertextuality; in short, such classifications lead us to believe that *all text is and always has been hypertext*—an equation which serves only to clarify the extent to which evolutions in personal computer applications, particularly web-page design, have codified our understanding of textuality. Perhaps we can find a useful analogy in the way in which Charles Olson put the “typewriter” (and its applications) to use as the objective correlative by which ‘open-field’ composition, practiced under different labels in Pound and Williams, could find suitable expression, not only as a tool in practice, but as a metaphor for practice. The invention of the typewriter, in other words, codified the conventions of late Modernism. Likewise, the computer-driven activity of web-based hypertext reinvents the text, but strictly in its own image, i.e., that provided by post-structuralist theory and deconstructionist critique.

suggesting an irrevocable change but only in so far as the word is irrevocably associative and paragrammatic (moving) and now becomes obviously so in its guise as hyperlink.

Glazier has something similar in mind when he describes words as "mines for the hyperactivity inherent in links" and even goes so far as to suggest what constitutes a "well-written link"⁶ (emphasis added)—which may seem odd to one accustomed to thinking of the hyperlink as something "imbedded" or "placed" rather than written, but which makes perfect sense when one considers the word/link (or hypergram) in the context of poetic paragram. In such a context, the act of writing is an act of imbedding or inscribing a textual environment in which "grams" (letters, words) take on the nature of links.

The point here is to invite a sense of 'hypergrammatical praxis' by which the notions of 'word-as-link' (in web page design) and 'word-as-paragram' (in book page design) are themselves linked, mutually informative, reciprocal. For as Glazier correctly states, "An imbedded link... is a feature of writing itself; links will continue to embrace both print and electronic technology. With HTML and other forms of hypertextual writing, links are simply foregrounded; texts continue to engage their own internal dynamics, but literally—or is it figuratively?—have other texts superimposed or imbedded in them." In a hypergrammatical writing, such textual interaction or superimposition is indeed literal⁷—in electronic space insofar as the hyperlink provides *intertextual* connectivity to other web sites, and in book or page space, insofar as the word's *local aspects* (sound, figure, sense⁸) suggest *intra-textual* links (words within words) in the paragrammatic setting of the text.

A poetics of the hypergram⁹ would hope to invigorate the writing space in light of the compositional (trans-spatial) possibilities

⁶The definition is worth noting here: "A well-written link is one that follows a natural digressive side-thought or astonishes with brazen and quick abruptness of thought" (26).

⁷Or "conscious," to return again to the distinction posed by McCaffery (see note 4 above).

⁸See note 4 above.

⁹I've managed to work in my own highly self-conscious term, *hypergram*, which in a successful theory of web-based writing (and it must be emphasized that such a theory would not distinguish between on and off-line works)

suggested by the hyperlink. It would also call for an investigation of syntax as it relates to a hypergrammatical environment.¹⁰ It is yet to be seen how such an investigation (of hypergram and its syntax) would prove 'invigorating' either to poetry or as a critical practice itself. If hypertext is nothing but text (in the post-structuralist sense) slightly juiced (thus reduced) in the frenzied point-and-click environment of computer hyperlinks, then little is gained by studying its developments. However, if hypertext can be set into motion not merely as text transplanted in electronic space, but rather as an area of high-density hypergrams (beyondwords, words within words), then the work generated out of this "motion", as well as the critical articulation of its method, would surely invite the kind of enthusiasm merited by the emergence of any new form.

could be useful for two reasons: (1) it suggests a single term by which the implied binary of "word" and "word-as-link" can be quickly dissolved, thus revising the "forever changed" of Glazier's analysis to the "always changed" of the word in on/off-line space; and (2) it avoids the ambiguity associated with poetic paragram by marking a conscious, intentional approach to language and poetic practice in accordance with the following: any engagement with the word is an engagement with *the word as is link*.

¹⁰It may be possible, for example, to conceive of a "hyper-sentence" not as simply a sentence-in-hypertext which may or may not contain links to other sites, but rather as the discrete set of pathways traced by following particular links in electronic space. Such paths would bear resemblance to the multiple-reading opportunities provided by 'open' texts in the print environment (Robert Grenier's *Sentences* comes to mind as a common example), but would differ in that the reader/browser's perception of boundaries (i.e., the range of *possible* reading paths) would be restricted to (and *by*) the reader's selected path. Other paths (i.e., other possible readings) would not be visible (ie, 'contained' in the book, or in the box as in Grenier's poem) until/ unless the reader engages another path. But, as suggested in the conclusion of this essay, it is still unclear just how a hypergrammatical syntax would differ specifically (if at all) from conventional syntax. A closer look at notions like 'hypergram' might answer the question. Finally, the question also remains as to how this notion of a hyper-sentence might ultimately double-back (as I argue in note 5 any notions of hypertext and link currently do) to affect our understanding of the sentence in so-called pre-PC documents.

Readings & Reviews

An Alphabet of Language Criticism

By Susan M. Schultz

THE MARGINALIZATION OF POETRY: LANGUAGE WRITING AND LITERARY HISTORY BY BOB PERELMAN (PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, \$15.95)

At the recent Assembling Alternatives conference held at the University of New Hampshire this past late August and early September, Bob Perelman opened his plenary talk with an unexpected defense of narrative and intelligibility. The reaction was long and loud; audience members, it seemed, fearing that Perelman was "mainstreaming" it, argued at length against his paper (to the unfortunate exclusion of any comments on other papers delivered on the same panel). The poems that he read during one of the long evening sessions contained the very qualities he was arguing for; they were neither non-narrative nor unintelligible. Perelman's book of essays on language writing came out soon before the conference; had it come out earlier, audience members might have been prepared for his comments, though they would still have been chary of them. For, at least on the face of it, *The Marginalization of Poetry* is more a work of explanatory criticism than it is a radical statement of poetics. Like Perelman's earlier book on genius and modernist writers, this is an academic tome, with both the strengths and weaknesses of such work. As such, it may surprise the readers of innovative poetics, including Perelman's own.

Perelman acknowledges in the first sentence of his book that he left the Bay Area in 1990 for a job at the University of Pennsylvania and that the move has involved another change as well. "This book," he writes, "reflects that move: my longstanding engagement with language writing will be evident as well as my later involvement with the larger, compartmentalized pastures of the academy." Perelman's vocabulary is telling here: the word "pastures" shows up in its own absence toward the end of the book in Perelman's take-off on Frost's

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invitation to the reader to come along across the pasture to clear the spring:

I'm going out to clean the Pierian Spring;
I'll only stop when all career lyricisms
are spread out on the word-tables, leaching
to the pocked sidewalks where some readers are in bed
by noon staring at their shoes.—You Write too.

This passage attempts to throw open the pasture doors in its call to the reader to be a writer—though not, of course, a career lyricist. This gesture of renouncing a certain vision of genre is meant to mirror the renunciation of poetry as the act of an elite, pastoral, poet. Thus, in the long poem/essay, "The Marginalization of Poetry," he writes:

What I am proposing in these
anti-generic, over-genred couplets is not some

genreless, authorless writing, but a physically
and socially located writing where margins

are not metaphors, and where readers
are not simply there, waiting to be liberated. (10)

This call to arms rehearses an old point, that poetry should not be read so much as re-written, and it sounds odd in the context of Perelman's remarks at the conference. Language writers such as Charles Bernstein argue that it is the very obscurity of their work that invites creative readings/writings. Perelman's critical view of Bernstein's work is, however, consistent with his defense of intelligibility as a goad to communal understanding—more on that soon.

But Perelman's quiet assertion that one phase of language writing is over signals his own real call to arms: "The initial phase of language writing is over; the careers of the participants continue; there is still widespread interest in and controversy over the issues that were raised" (17). There's a sly quality to this sentence, which connects (via the hesitancy of the semi-colon) the end of one phase of language writing with the fact that the careers of the language writers are ongoing. Given that these poets are in mid-career, then, how does their work need to change in order to bring the work into a new phase? Rather than write his own poetics, Perelman uses the mask of the officially sanctioned literary critic to assert his own agenda via that of

other language writers. The foils for his own poetics are, Charles Bernstein, in a poetic black hat, and Ron Silliman, in white. Perelman argues against what he sees as Bernstein's precarious vacillations: "The [Bernstein] model oscillates between a writing that unites opposites and a writing that refuses identity" (82). Perelman asserts that Bernstein's "potential [utopian] republic faces major structural problems," among these the difficulty of bringing together different, multicultural, voices through a poetics of extreme "singularity." So, "These statements outline the political territory Bernstein claims: there is no state and it governs by singular, nonnormative judgments. If one had to pick out a slogan to appear on the currency, perhaps the following would do: 'The violence of every generalization crushes the hopes for a democracy of thoughts'" (81). And so, he writes of what he see as Bernstein's trade-off: "To avoid this violence [of generalization], stability of genre is sacrificed" (85). As a result of this anti-generalizing impulse in Bernstein's work, Perelman finds that Bernstein "envision[s] individual enclaves of textual freedom standing in for politics" (95).

One could locate the same kind of generic slippage, I think, in Perelman's need to be anti- and over-generic at the same time; in his own paradox he locates the very politics that he does not find in Bernstein. But Perelman uses genre symbolically here as a measure of engagement and intelligibility; because genres have traditionally conveyed certain kinds of information (or lacks thereof), Perelman hangs onto them as explanatory, rather than merely formal, categories.

But the real thrust of Perelman's critique of Bernstein is in his identification of Bernstein with individualism, albeit a post humanist version of it, where words stand in for people. Other individualist poets, such as Allen Ginsberg and John Ashbery, fare even worse in Perelman's accounting: "There is a direct link in Ginsberg's poem between private and public: one person in a car, a single body speaking is asserted to be able to enter history, to sexualize, clarify, and alter it. Ashbery's writing, on the other hand, uses public materials casually and unpredictably" (118). And Robert Frost is the father of them all: "Frost's position—lone sage facing and possessing the landscape for the nation [at President Kennedy's inauguration]—is an affirmation of the American status quo that is difficult for poets to ignore" (111). Frost's aestheticizing of the concept of "nation" and "land" seems equivalent, in Perelman's accounting, to Ashbery's "summer days" poetry, more poetry than life, more language than politics.

If Bernstein, then, is the primary contemporary fall guy, straw

man, utopian paradoxicalist, Ron Silliman is the poet hero of Perelman's book. Silliman, according to the sympathetic reading of him here, combines the parataxis or radical discontinuity of the *echt* language writer with the social responsibility of a writer of narrative. Silliman's contradictions are cast in a much more favorable light than are Bernstein's, even when they begin to sound similar to his: "New sentences [Silliman's 'invention'] imply continuity and discontinuity simultaneously, an effect that becomes clearer when they are read over longer stretches" (67). But what more importantly separates Silliman from Bernstein, according to Perelman, are "faith" and "narrative," terms that would have been hooted down in New Hampshire. Hence he writes that "this writing seems to me self-critical, ambitiously contextualized, and narrative in a number of ways" (66), and that, "The root of Silliman's political aesthetics is faith in language as the site of an active community, not inheriting meanings but creating them through precise acts of reading and writing" (74). Perelman makes the point even more ascerbicly when he maintains that Silliman does not "attempt to highlight the pathos (and humor) of a separation of art from life, or poetry from philosophy," which seems to me to be a direct dig at Bernstein's manic wit, though Perelman does prefer Bernstein's more recent work because he thinks that Bernstein is now committing himself more clearly to "a poetics."

If Perelman is willing to set up an argument for his version of language writing as a responsible literary, ethical, and political practice by using Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman (among others) as antagonists, he is apparently unwilling to establish such distinctions between women language writers. Rather, perhaps because "these women [Beverly Dahlen, Susan Howe, Rae Armantrout, and Carla Harryman], while quite different from one another, will not display the same automatic access (whether positive or negative) to larger political and cultural mappings that we have seen in Frost, Ginsberg, Ashbery, and Watten" (127), Perelman does not seek to map these writers in opposition to each other. They are grouped together, beginning with the subsection of the chapter "This Page Is My Page" entitled "Gendered Maps," where their lack of access can be considered separately. Perelman is sympathetic with all of these writers. Dahlen "continually asserts the fact of and the impossibility of being a woman and writing out of that situation" (129); Howe becomes an antagonist to Frost; Armantrout takes on the gender wars emanating from the Garden of Eden; and Harryman represents "a condition beyond gender" (143). There is no hint of discord for Perelman be-

tween these women writers, however different he acknowledges their work to be, and there is no hint of any difference of opinion between him and them. Perelman's refusal to judge writers who he claims, in many ways rightly, suffer from different expectations and considerably more double-binds than do the male writers he discusses, is in some ways admirable. Yet their ghettoization into a group concerned almost exclusively with gender (where the men, seemingly, are not) is troublesome. It's as if they're engaged in an entirely different activity. As Perelman's recent poems, presented in New Hampshire, sounded on first hearing to be very much about gender politics, it's disappointing that he doesn't here address the question of "male writing." Perhaps an investigation of his own work, as difficult and perilous as that is for any writer, especially an academic one, would open this important issue up for investigation.

Perelman's book should prove to be an important (yes narrative, yes intelligible) bridge between language writers and the academy, a relationship that is still difficult, despite Perelman's position at Penn, Bernstein's and Howe's at SUNY-Buffalo. Language writing has produced a lot of theory of its own, but it has not been written about in terms that make its typical inaccessibility accessible. I myself do not agree with many of the distinctions he makes between the work of Bernstein and Silliman; Bernstein is more socially engaged than Perelman gives him credit for, and Silliman pays as much mind to form and lyricism as does Bernstein. But, whether or no one agrees with Perelman's specific arguments, the book marks an important moment in the literary history of contemporary poetry. It should open up much-needed discussions between language writers about issues that are too often taken for granted—issues like how to build and extend community, and how to think about the relationship between poetic form and actual—not just theoretical—politics. Perelman will make some members of his audience angry, but that is a good thing, as any contentious academic will let you know.

The Trouble With Language

By Dan Featherston

THE TROUBLE WITH GENIUS: READING POUND, JOYCE, STEIN AND ZUKOFSKY BY BOB PERELMAN (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, \$16)

The question of genius and the assumptions made regarding it as either "genius" or avant ("before," "in front of," "to the side of" the contemporary) are issues Bob Perelman addresses in *The Trouble with Genius*. The book examines the works of Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky, asking what role does the literary genius play between the aesthetic and social realms.

As Perelman notes, all four of these writers "made strong claims for the immediacy of their writing," and yet to varying degrees their work is largely unread and incomprehensible to the "reader on the street." Perelman notes that this obscurity is in part symptomatic of the "second hand" status ascribed to modernist texts in a so-called "post-" modern age when "Barthes and Derrida are the *writers*, not the critics, that students now read" (author's emphasis: 205).

But the real trouble with genius concerns the ironic tension in which the genius-work exists as both *avant* and *garde* of its unique, socio-political context. One of Perelman's primary frames for defining genius is the Kantian bridge-builder between "the provinces of art and nature" (219). This involves a kind of contract:

Since language is the social medium *par excellence*, the social authority of genius cannot simply manifest itself as discrete points of inexplicable distance (217).

Then under the social contract of language, to what degree is the writer-genius obligated to the public, and vice-versa? And how does this "contract" influence the very methods developed by these exemplary modernists?

Perelman's examination of these issues is astute without weighting the work in the critical jargon one would expect in an approach to, say, Zukofsky's epic, "A". At the same time, the analyses are not exhaustive chartings of literary allusions; nor is that the focus of the book. Rather, the biographical, as relative to historical and

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narrative aspects of the texts, is a "way in" for Perelman and the reader: Pound's radio broadcasts, Stein's post-Toklas public persona, Joyce's tropes of marriage, (in)fidelity, and sexuality, and Zuke's relationships to the political, religious, familial, and musical all inform the tensions and complexities between writing-genius and reading-public.

From this biographical and historical basis, Perelman goes straight to the texts: the contact zone where the troubles with genius are exemplified. For instance, the progressively clipped, ideogrammic language of *The Cantos* is interpreted as (among other things) symptomatic of Pound's selectivity in regards to the public's (i.e., reader's) religious, economic, and political perspectives.

But the texts, for Perelman, are anything but mere biographical allegories; the book's primary attentiveness is to the language of genius. Perelman draws an interesting distinction between the traditional uses of narrative and linear plot versus stylistic innovations developed by Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky. These writers' radical departures from traditional narrative, as well as their return to an epic format (excepting Stein), are viewed as ways of anticipating the movement of culture.

While *The Trouble with Genius* is more about trouble than genius, Perelman takes an optimistic stance in his "Afterword: *Afterward*" in which genius is viewed through the lenses of history and pragmatism:

While the writing is underway—while the generic title is still *Work in Progress*—to be fully legible dooms genius to ordinariness. Once completed, a work of genius should, in theory, be recognizable as sublimely new and astounding; after the fact, the narratives of literary history take over and place *The Cantos*, however uneasily, in the heterogeneous category of the modernist long poem.... This three-step process is nondialectical: would-be cutting edges fall back into the matrix without necessarily producing syntheses. From the vantage of the nonspecialist, this pattern might look suspiciously like the primal problem facing any producer in the marketplace where the imperative to "Make It New" applies at least as urgently to cars as to poems (217).

After Perelman's ostensible ease and consistency in tackling some of modernism's most difficult texts, *The Trouble with Genius* is impressive for its discussion of the historical placement of a text in relation to the idea of "genius." Indeed, the assignation of the term "genius" to a writer, while not in itself of great importance, can be

viewed not only as a model for contextualizing the tension between literature and its social-historical climate, but as a paradigm for the trouble with language: "communication *par excellence*," and yet an obstruction between (genius's) intent and (public's) interpretations.

Minimalism and Poetic Silence

By Kasey Cummings and Carl Peters

MADE TO SEEM BY RAE ARMANTROUT (SUN & MOON PRESS, \$9.95)

Derrida's understanding of writing as being in a supplementary relation to presence, and hence communication in 'the normal, non-multivalent, non-polysemic sense,' is problematized by Armantrout in her most recent book of poems *Made to Seem*. Her poetry seems to present a series of reluctant frames which involve writing against inference and which seem to endlessly refer as they defer / differ.

As a reader of Derrida like Geoffery Ulmer has pointed out, writing as iterability functions in the absence of author, referent, receiver, and context. The absence intrinsic to any text is the very locus of meaning / production and is, in a sense, always already *written*, inscribed, in the aporia of the text, that is, beyond or against the author's intent. As Marcel Duchamp's linguistic experiments and puns help to point out, there is always a gap — an absence — between intention, what one wants to say, and realization — what one *does* say. That is to say, a blindspot occurs in the space between what a text means to say and what it is constrained to mean. Thus, as Ulmer would point out following Derrida, writing's vehicular / representational / communicative aspect or pretense 'does not exhaust the event of sense.'

It seems that Armantrout entertains a theory of writing similar to Derrida's. She too also seems to reassess "certain elements of a discourse that until now have been treated as dysfunctions and aberrations" (Ulmer *GLASary* "Sounding the Unconscious" 25). In her *Errata Suite* Joan Retallack writes with dysfunctional contingencies (i.e., with error) in order to inscribe what would normally have been (and what normally is) written against, or in other words, what would have normally been absent or silent. Armantrout's project would thus seem, at first glance, to be somewhat different. The whole *look* of her

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poetry, its graphic presentation, is very traditional, regimented, compartmentalized, proper: left-justified margins, titles for every poem, even a table of contents, poems which themselves are seemingly delightfully brief. The question to ask is: what is she doing *against* these *seemings*, these appearances? How is she writing against them? How is she (like Retallack) inscribing silence into the poetry? Because once one gets into the poetry there is this automatic feeling of the overwhelmingness, the very ubiquity of silence. It screams at us from every dumb, blank space on the page. The kind of minimalist stance which I perceive in the passage below, however, is conceptual — psychological. What does "it," for example, refer to in the first line?

Now, when it makes no sense,
I'm at the centre
of the dispelled universe,
"snapping to"
too often — as if there was
nothing but
("Retraction")

The seemingly very 'silent' text is, paradoxically, a very 'noisy' text. Is Armantrout then, like Retallack, writing with error, but, unlike Retallack, writing with it from *beyond* the phonological, morphological, and syntactical level (i.e., in the realm of pronouncement, statement, dialogue, discourse, performatives)? It would seem that Armantrout is working with the possibility of error and miscommunication at the level of exchange and / or the level of the formal constraint: "Hey, everybody needs somewhere / in which to present / the drama of their limitation" ("Next").

One can point to the sparsity of the poetry itself or the economy of the language, its laconic aspect, the fact that Armantrout is not a poet who minces words. Indeed, her intent to literalize metaphor places her in relation to the minimalist project of the 1960s and 70s. This comparison is not a disparate one. Both employ strategies of seriality and self-reference in order to concretize experience and the experience of art. The three dimensional quality of Rae Armantrout's poetry transforms its silence spatially: "Let us / move fast / enough, in a small / enough space, and / our travels / will take first / shape, then substance" ("The Creation").

One can't help but experience these poems as *structures* akin to minimalist objects / sculptures — as architectural spaces. The poet's

handling of the page as a unit of composition is relevant here. Indeed the *spatial* design of the poem is one important characteristic of modern poetics. Armantrout's distribution of space (i.e., the "blanks" between, above, below words) assume *significance* — they construct and constitute the "silence" intrinsic in her work, and are as skillfully composed (constructed) as any minimalist installation or environment. Both Armantrout and the minimalists / conceptualists are acutely aware of their work as *structure*.

Armantrout composes her silences in several ways which she outlines in her essay "Poetic Silence." In some instances, the spatial relation between words intensifies this; in other instances, these silences are effected through paradigmatic shifts in subject and content. Additionally, the poet may 1) end a line or a poem abruptly, unexpectedly, somehow short of resolution; 2) create extremely tenuous connections between parts of a poem; 3) deliberately create the effect of inconsequence; 4) use of self-contradiction or retraction; 5) use obvious ellipsis; and, 6) use anything which places the existent in perceptible relation to the non-existent, the absent or outside (34-35). Now, it would be stretching things to attempt to conceptualize all six strategies in relation to minimalism; but several of them relate. For instance, most minimalist works do, in fact, stop short of resolution — there is nothing to resolve. In this regard, a minimalist work might well be compared to a film-loop in which you never get to the end, but are drawn back into the work. The process act of reading such works is, essentially, phenomenological — experiential. They're meant to be experienced as open-ended structures, often linear, but always subversive in terms of resolution or closure. They resituate the reader in actual time and real space—spaces as time. In terms of minimalist art, *presence* is a key term. There is no beginning, middle or ending to the minimalist work. (Witness Don Judd's metal wall sculptures, Carl Andre's "rugs" — *lever*, to name a few.) Consequently, its structures are not the structures of traditional / conventional three dimensional art. As Mel Bochner elaborates, "[this] work cannot be discussed on either stylistic or metaphorical grounds. [It merely articulates] the clearly visible and simply ordered structure it uses. For some artists order itself is the work of art" (93). Minimalism's preoccupation with structure and order in art foregrounds the importance of *seriality*. I recognize, however, that discussion of Armantrout's work in terms of *seriality* (even as the minimalists themselves define the term: literally: one thing after another) is limited. In any case, there is still a relatable strategy of *ordering* at work in her poetry. Each stanza,

for example, can be read as an independent poem-unit; often the break between a stanza is heightened by the visual or graphic presence of an asterisk, bullet or number. This intensifies the "poetic silence" between each stanza-unit; it also spatializes the poem graphically, the result of which is the [a] dramatization of presence and absence. (See, for instance, "Retraction," "One Remove," "Covers," and "The Creation" — to mention just the first few poems in *Made To Seem*.) The presentation of these poems is straight-forward, almost aphoristic — writing grounded in the negative — and paratactic; they are one perception after and on top of one another. Armantrout's *appositional* writing is similar to minimalist strategies of presentation and contextualization. Minimalism, of course, takes parataxis to its extreme conclusion and abstracts it while at the same time it literalizes it. Representation of the subject / object is pared down to mere presentation: one *thing* right after another. Armantrout's words are like "objects in an arrangement" (Watten, 92). Minimalist art is aphoristic in the sense that it reconceptualizes and reduces it to structure and units of structure. Its aesthetic project is merely the repetition of this — as an *ideal*. This kind of work demands a new kind of reader. Both reconceptualize art in terms of the phenomenological, the material, "in the sense that," as Lyn Hejinian asserts, "the phenomenological *situation* [my emphasis] includes perceiver, perception (or perceiving), perceived, and the various meanings of their relationships, which are not mild" (83).

The two other important strategies of composing silence in works which relate to minimalism focus on the creation of the effect of inconsequence, as well as the placement of the existent (i.e., the subject / perceiver) in perceptible relation to the non-existent (the object), the absent or outside. Here both Judd's and Robert Morris' metal and glass "boxes" achieve these effects. These examples *are*, literally, *open* structures. In the case of Judd's reflecting metal and brass boxes, the aesthetic effect of inconsequence is achieved vis-a-vis the artist's intent to eliminate relational order altogether, along with referential and metaphorical qualities. By relational order, I mean, following Kenneth Baker, "the camouflaged hierarchies of internal detail and focus that underlie the expressiveness of painting, representational or abstract" (58). Transformed in this way, the work is 'emptied,' so to speak, turned inside out. As a result, Judd's boxes border on the inconsequential in that they are both (simultaneously) present as well as absent; that is, their polished surfaces both absorb and reflect their environment. The work (formally) cancels itself out. They

are also, therefore, a kind of retraction.

My objective thus far has been to try to show (however tenuous) the relation between Armantrout's work and minimalism. The premise underlying this relation is the intent to literalize metaphor. The minimalists aspired to do this as well, and it's my contention that they succeeded, in part, by rejecting the mimetic or representational function of art. (Armantrout poetry engages in a similar interrogation of the image, of representation, and how things are — well I can't refuse a wonderful play like this — 'made to seem.') Conceptual art is the furthest extreme of this, epitomized by the work of Joseph Kosuth. I am thinking particularly of his definition of conceptual art in "Art After Philosophy I and II": art as an analytically framed proposition which questions the very nature, the very definition, of art. "Works of art," he asserts, "are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context — as art — they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art *is* art, which means, is a *definition* of art" (164). I don't wish to suggest that this kind of abstract, aesthetic theorizing is characteristic of Armantrout's poetry. Kosuth, in the final analysis, is bent on removing the experience from the work of art, and this is antithetical to Armantrout's work, at least antithetical to my reading of her work. I might also add that Kosuth's position is antithetical to minimalism. The direct and confrontational relation, *experience*, (of) between the perceiver and the work, the perceived, is the primary *content* and underlying aesthetic of minimalist work. But Armantrout's poems, though, can be read as analytical propositions which investigate (interrogate and analyze) experience and authenticity. (There is a *factual*, almost documentary and non-fictional, quality to them.) As one commentator has observed, her poems are "analytical lyrics" (Peterson, 90). And, like conceptual art, the clean, graphic presentation of her poems imply a *clear* intention. Unlike conceptual art, however, this is quickly undermined.

We can also relate the spatial and surface quality of her poems to certain trends in modern painting. For someone like Clement Greenberg, modernist painting (the modernist aesthetic) derives from its insistence on (and affirmation of) the flatness and integrity of the picture plane. Toby Mussman, though, in an essay entitled "Literalness and the Infinite," distinguishes between Greenberg's notion of the importance of the picture plane in modern art and the material implications of "surfaceness." It's important to bear in mind, he notes,

the fact that Greenberg's idea of the picture plane stems from his study of the analytic cubist paintings and collages of Picasso and Braque. Yet for Mussman, it is this very technique (collage) which creates a new notion of "surfaceness" in art, and he argues that Greenberg fails to take this into account. Thus the collaged surfaces of modern painting in general foreground a new phenomenological approach to the literal. And thus the new picture plane invented by modernist painters (Rauschenberg and Pollock) is not a theoretical one, but a material one. *Surfaceness*, as Mussman perceives it, is a concrete thing.

Rae Armantrout's poems can also be read, conceptualized, as *concrete things*. They are collages in Mussman's sense of that term. Reality fragments, phrases from the media, from conversation, are rewritten and palimpsested into the new context of the poem. Her poetic surfaces are not flat in the Greenbergian sense, ostensibly, but explode into three dimensional, concrete things:

On the inscribed surface
of sleep.

Almost constant
bird soundings.

"Aloha, Fruity Pebbles!"

Music, useful
for abstracting emphasis.

Sweet nothing
to do with me.
("Confidential")

Armantrout's poetry underscores the extraordinary implicit in the ordinary, the mundane; to paraphrase Marjorie Perloff in a recent book by her entitled *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*, Armantrout's poetry helps us understand ordinary language as it's actually used by all of us. Further to this, her poems are sites where the ordinary is most sharply foregrounded.

However, there is another visual corollary for Armantrout's poetry aside from the possible connection to minimalist art which is prompted by Armantrout herself; it is the connection to Jean Baptiste

Simeon Chardin's *The Skate*, a detail of which appears on the cover of *Made To Seem*. Through a minimum of detective work, I have discovered that Chardin's "Skate" is thought to be very significant in the whole tradition of still-life painting along with the later still-lives of Francisco Goya. Chardin's "Skate" (1728) along with Goya's *Still Life with Lamb's Head* (c. 1816-24) have been cited as moments in the history of still-life painting wherein there is suddenly expressed a growing interest in simplification and selection (one might also call this function one of *foregrounding*) which attends every moment in Armantrout's poetry. She gives a sense of both the arbitrariness and spontaneity of selection, of paradigmatic displacements outwards, on the one hand, and at the same time a sense of the careful, painstaking, lurking, precious operation of selection / pruning / editing. Her poetry delivers irreverence and care in the same gesture in much the same way as the idioms of Chardin and Goya in their respective still-lives. Armantrout's poetry and the painting of Chardin and Goya comprise art which 'attends absence's modulations.' Absence operates more like a full presence in this art and thus could be said to be inscribed through its very absence. (Indeed, much like the reflecting and refracting boxes of Don Judd and Robert Morris.) The very effect is a rewriting of 'traditional' grammars of representation, 'traditional' values and preconceptions.

Chardin's paintings have also been described as: 'silent paintings'; paintings of ease, simplicity, air, space, circulation, lucidity, penetration; paintings with a sense of broad treatment rendered in thick impasto highlights; paintings with simple unsentimentalized compositions [read: *minimal*]; paintings with calm, balanced tonal ranges, acute analysis and understanding of form; paintings of an 'abstract' nature; and paintings of honesty, insight, and sympathy. "The Skate" itself has been described, in terms of the tradition of still-life painting, as an escape from the airlessness and the hermetic, overcrowded canvases of earlier still-lives. A "skate" is also known as a "ray"; the painting is thus a good example of self-reference. Chardin's emphasis is on direct and *literal* representation. In all of these instances one can feel as if one were reading a metatextual description of Rae Armantrout's poetry.

Chardin himself has been described as 'the poet of the commonplace and the master of its nuances.' This could describe Armantrout herself, as well. And the word 'nuance' is an important word here in that it recalls Armantrout's poem "Tone" from her *Extremities* of 1978:

Is it bourgeois to dwell on nuance? Or effeminate?
Or should we attend to it the way a careful animal
shifts the wind?

'Nuance' can be understood as, not only its usual sense of a subtle or delicate degree of meaning, tone, or feeling, but also as a gradation by which color passes from its lightest to its darkest shade. And this sends one thinking of the text of *Made To Seem* itself: all of the shadows; the trajectory which takes place in the text departing from the light comedy of "Sit Calm," the first poem through the dark irony of 'stylized Death' in "Leaving," the last poem; gradation, movement, transilience. The mobile frame is both permeating and permeable, made to seem (a frame). One contemplates connections to Duchamp and Einsteinian physics through this illusion of movement through a single framed space. 'The rapid (relative to the eye's ability to retain an image briefly) projection of a sequence of still photographs (or 'frames') of an action' seems a good description of what Armantrout's poetry does. There is the constant sense of frames moving through frames, frames transposed, frames superimposed one atop the other. Everything is moving, running, turning swiftly. Boccioni's Futurist Manifesto of 1910 even comes to mind in the attempt to describe Armantrout's poetry: "The figure in front of us never is still, but ceaseless appears and disappears. Owing to the persistence of images on the retina, objects in motion are multiplied, distorted, following one another like waves through space." One thinks of the excitement phase that art went through in response to the motion picture. Transilient and mobile frames are made to seem 'framed' in a single framed space. Fleeting poems are retained only briefly. They must be read / seen quickly (through). They are indeed almost 'glimpsed at' rather than read. And yet, they are also, paradoxically, still, stilled. For contained within the concept of simultaneity at 'time c' in this poetry is the sense of absolute stillness — *minimalism*. These poems pause, pausing, paused, posed on the brink of cessation, silence, absence. Armantrout paradoxically 'stills the wind on the water.' She writes still-life still (full) of life, she writes with movement, motion, vitality. There is the constant sense of compression, encryption, repetition, condensing and yet also of decompression, decryption, difference, release. This is paratactic writing: contraction *contracting* itself, promising to deliver ... yet more contraction. Made to explode.

And yet words seem to operate as if they were 'switch-points'

in her poetry, in the sense that they are at once (*seemingly*) driven into and riveted to the concrete ('edgy') — that is, much of the language is at first very limited in its associations — at the same time absolutely permeable and permeating (all process). Failed magicians, Fruity Pebbles, flamenco dancers, birds, electron guns, the Green Giant, plant-life, cellophane grass, disco studs, hospital calendars, and Chevron pumps — all of these things are written aboard a beam of light in *Made To Seem*. After several readings one finds that the words explode out of their context, garnering a polysemic referentiality, projecting into the silence that we begin to fill with our voices, our words, our noise: "We weren't supposed to stare / so, when we did, / a blankness spread across / the once pleasant features. // We got started: / lists of objects, lists of attributes" ("Normal Heights"). Are we "[f]orever drawing water through a maze of cabbages" ("The Work") in *Made To Seem*? Armantrout leads us into the insoluble conflict of the aporia: "coconut and mashed potato clumps awash in milk" ("The Work"). Our reading melts, with the text, into the indistinguishable — a product of Armantrout's attenuating of the untenable.

Made To Seem is a text akin to Derrida's *Glas* in that it contributes to the postmodern project of thinking otherwise, of transgressing "the coherent unity of a metaphysics that has proven inadequate to the problems we face" (Ulmer 27). Well, made to *seem*.

Find the place
in silence
that is a person

or like a person
or like not
needing a person
("A Pulse")

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Gevirtz's Richardson

By Susan Smith Nash

NARRATIVE'S JOURNEY: THE FICTION AND FILM WRITING OF DOROTHY RICHARDSON BY SUSAN GEVIRTZ (PETER LANG, \$30.00)

Susan Gevirtz has made a great contribution to the advancement of the history of women's criticism and literary analysis in her work on the writings of Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957), an overlooked yet important British writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Gevirtz dispenses with the plot summary and overview approach that often passes for criticism and looks instead at how Richardson constructed a text that takes on a particular identity, depending on the unique perspectives of men and women. Richardson went much further, and described how it is that literary and film discourse engenders itself as it is being written.

Approaching Richardson's oeuvre in a manner that would undoubtedly please Richardson, Gevirtz begins by explaining that Richardson intended that *Pilgrimage*, her massive (and largely unobtainable) 13-volume assemblage of separate but connected novels, to be studied as the "feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism." Written at roughly the same time as Proust's *Recherches*, Richardson's *Pilgrimage* responds to the male writers of the psychological novel by creating a "landscape of the female mind." Unfortunately, Richardson's work is not widely known, although excerpts from the novel do appear in a few anthologies and her writings on film are often studied in communication and film theory classes.

Looking at Richardson's notion that discursive forms and texts (film and literary) are gendered, Gevirtz finds this idea expressed not only in *Pilgrimage*, but also in Richardson's critical work, particularly in her fascinating essays on early cinema. Richardson argued that silent film is a prototypically feminine form while the talkies were masculine. She made many other observations and analyses, which were published in the journal, *Close-Up*. Gevirtz explains that Richardson's basic argument was that film is a surface upon which identity is constructed and reconstructed in an unending interweav-

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ing between the consciousness of the viewers and the substance of the film.

Richardson's ideas are not always easily extracted, and Gevirtz provides a valuable resource for getting at their substance. Richardson's work is often impenetrable with its length, density, and the rather opaque nature of her stream-of-consciousness, psychological writing. Richardson's fiction was never popular or commercially successful, which perhaps accounts for the relative neglect her work has suffered. While other women modernists — Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, H.D. — have been widely acknowledged, Dorothy Richardson has been overlooked. This may be in part due to the perspectives of the first Richardson critics, who often wrote more to promote their own agendas (and their ideas regarding psychological, stream-of-consciousness writing or feminist interpretations of "interior monologues"). However, her critical neglect is probably more due to the lack of available primary texts. In fact, none of the individual 13 novels that constitute *Pilgrimage* was widely available until the 1979 Virago edition which contained all the novels in a 4-volume set.

Gevirtz is the first scholar to write an extensive, in-depth study of Richardson's *Pilgrimage* and on her film writing. This in itself is enough to make the work extremely valuable to scholars, students, and critics. However, in *Narrative's Journey*, Gevirtz has done much more. She has integrated Richardson's film writing, criticism, and fiction to make a coherent presentation — one in which the various writings serve to illuminate each other. Gevirtz explains her methods in the preface to the book, that she wishes to "animate concurrent readings, to open fissures, and propose directions for thought. My investigation proceeds as much by analogy and association as by linear logic." Gevirtz's approach is strikingly appropriate for investigating the work of Richardson, since she herself stated in the introduction to *Pilgrimage* that she wished to propose an alternative to what is generally perceived as linear logic or clear speech.

The first chapter of *Narrative's Journey* establishes non-linearity as the most appropriate approach to time elements within *Pilgrimage* as well as to the relations developed between reader and the text. According to Gevirtz, Richardson's own attitude toward time in a narrative is that it should not be exclusively linear, but that there are overlappings and simultaneities which make time a vertical relationship rather than a linear, horizontal progression. Thus, any journey taken by a narrative should never simply involve chronological or causal elements arranged in a linear manner. Instead, the narrative

journey is more one of uncovering the areas of contact and overlap that exist between the mind of the individual and the external, phenomenal world.

Gevirtz explains how Richardson came to consider the writing process as a quest. It is important to note that Richardson emphasized the writing process rather than the writing itself. Thus, in the process of constructing a bildungsroman or representing the hero engaging in developing himself or herself, the author makes decisions about how to forge a new way of writing. This is the quest, and it signifies the author's willingness to consider how the reader may develop various strategies for reading.

The role of film cannot be underestimated in Richardson's attitudes toward reading and writing. For her, film "provided a spatial and mental allegory" for modernist art forms. Thus, film was the visual expression of what artists and writers wanted to try in order to continue their experiments and vision quests to build new works. Gevirtz shows again how Richardson used the repetitive surfaces of film in order to build a new written form which allows the construction of a space where psychological difference can come to the surface. Of course, it is clear that gender is as much as a construct as an essentialist notion. Nevertheless, Gevirtz allows the development of an alternative paradigm — that of the quest for new discursive forms — for the enrichment of feminist critical theory. It is a valuable analysis and critical perspective, and one that brings forth new possibilities, not just for critical reading and writing, but also for the novel and innovative responses to film.

Silence of the Known World

By Tod Thilleman

CLOWN AT WALL : A KENNETH BERNARD READER
(CONFRONTATION PRESS, \$16)

Because the civilized "real" demands a discriminating attention, Kenneth Bernard has eluded, apparently, even his most loyal followers. The epithet "dark" has been wrapt about his name far too long, and yet he has, himself, been able to use these and other misapprehensions to striking, sometimes sheer, cacophonous, and often scatological effect. From this riposte arises his genius, but also the problems of getting that staged, etc.

Part of Bernard's problems have stemmed from the fact that audiences are not used to theatric form poking fun at sacrosanct areas of normalcy, never mind, for instance, the choreographed geriatrics in wheelchairs that serve as entre-d'acts in *One Thing Is Not Another* (A Vaudeville, Curse of Fool) nor the laughing performers about to be gassed by the Nazis in *How We Danced While We Burned* (both from Asylum Arts.) Take for instance *Marko's: A Vegetarian Fantasy*, or *La Fin Du Cirque*, two theater pieces that continue this Bernardian tradition, and close out the very rich new book, *Clown At Wall*.

Along with the plays and the excerpts from the two greatest short novels by a living author that it has been my good fortune to have heard about and read (*The Maldive Chronicles*, *From the District Files*, both Fiction Collective) there are representative short fictions, which Bernard has consumed himself with after apparently running into a wall as it were in the release and recognition of his plays. And it is a good thing too. The area covered by short fiction and the personal essay (what is now called creative nonfiction) is excellently handled by Bernard. He has called the pieces "inward spiraling ironies" but more to the point it seems to me they attempt (unabashedly naive but always with profitable result) to solve in a short space the large questions, without the artifice of a constantly aware ironic carapace greeting the reader at every turn. They continually surprise, delight, while horrifying, but they never linger in unknown pomposity. They are always, from the first sentence, addresses to the heart of the sub-

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ject, no matter how insignificant. In this way he is for sure the American counterpart and continuation of Samuel Beckett's best work.

And speaking of Beckett, as if Bernard himself knew it, the recently published (*Collages & Bricolages*, Fall 1996) "Molloy Monologues", a brilliant series of dramatic spinoffs from the voice of the narrator of Beckett's trilogy, secure the center stage of this collection, right next to the long poem "Wall." Both of these pieces remind me of what is missing in American Poetry: the tender flesh and beating bloody heart of candor. So often Bernard makes what passes for the contemporary look like conceited contrivance:

111.

I know their fingers will violate me
but never near the mark

instead
probe you my head
find in that squishy gray
the thoughts that made me human

then press hand upon your clothéd self
see what rubs off and what won't

"Wall" comprises 140 pieces, each more bald than the previous, yet culminating in an appraisal of the self, body, ego, with chilling effect, reminding me of his previous booklength series "The Baboon In The Nightclub" (Asylum Arts). Each stands as witness to the silence and loneliness of the mind, unabashedly holding out for statement: "this is a killing place/pure and simple." A place where the procession of blood and other body fluids/parts have their revelatory stance, and speak for all mankind. In fact, it is such a stance that marks all of Bernard's work, where the intimate thing stands poking its head into the big questioning mind of our shared time. One is reminded of Shelley's phrase in "Prometheus Unbound": "Pinnacled dim in the intense inane."

In the "Molloy Monologues," the staged woman narrator ("somewhere between the ages of 45-60") reanimates some of the more famous lines of Beckett's *Molloy*. *Molloy* would stand as some sort of ontological text, over against Bernard's ontotheological woman. She is the archetype of the now, and serves to punctuate what was so moving about Beckett's first person novel of ideas, the questing philosopher suddenly finding himself not only in a dying body, but in a

dying world and humanity. Kenneth Bernard, with the expert hand of the thinker, deftly plants his character's feet among the noumenal ruins, the phenomenologically epic sweep of silence and noise, the elemental forces of that bleak soulscape few American writers have the patience and humor to walk through and manage with much skill. Bernard, however, does.

In fact, as his main character monologues: "And then yesterday, before noon, a bit of sun, thank god, coming in, I saw the cup, and everything stopped, everything stopped. My god, I thought, how beautiful, how beautiful it all is. I don't know how long I stood, or sat, there. It must have been a while, because noon came and Harry came in. And when I looked at him, my face was full of tears. He must be a very wise man, one of the wise ones, because he didn't say anything. He just hugged me. And came into my silence. My beautiful silence." She would come forward now in the late twentieth century to stand as the personification of mercy in a spiritless age, an age the poet of "Wall" makes plain and real as the so-called world: "I am run over by them/I am the wheels screaming."

Publications Received

BOOKS & CHAPBOOKS

The River Road by Michael Gottlieb, Potes & Poets Press, \$10, 1996.

Drafts 15-XXX, The Fold by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Potes & Poets Press, \$12, 1996.

Contrafact by Norma Cole, Potes & Poets Press, \$11, 1996

Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK edited by Maggie O'Sullivan, Reality Street, £9, 1996.

Absence Sensorium by Tom Mandel and Daniel Davidson, Potes & Poets, \$14, 1996.

No Soap Radio by Peter Ganick, Drogue Press, \$13.50, 1994.

Goya's L.A. a play by Leslie Scalapino, Potes & Poets, \$8.50, 1994

Natural Facts by Melanie Neilson, Potes & Poets, \$11, 1996.

Light Street by Nick Piombino, Zasterle Press, No Price Listed, 1997.

Why I Am Not A Christian by Jefferson Hansen, primitive publications, \$4, 1997.

Agoraphobia by Peter Ganick, Drogue Press, \$11, 1997.

Split Poems by Bob Harrison, Bronze Skull Press, \$3, 1995.

Broken English by Dodie Bellamy and Bob Harrison, Meow Press, \$6, 1996.

Sleight of Foot (anthology) by Miles Champion, Helen Kidd, Harriet Tarlo, Scott Thurston, Reality Street Editions, £5, 1996.

JOURNALS

House Organ (number 17, Winter 1997), edited by Kenneth Warren (1250 Belle Avenue, Lakewood, OH 44107).

Smelt Money (number 9), edited by Jim McCrary (P.O. Box 591, Lawrence, KS 66044)

Lyric& (number 5), edited by Avery E.D. Burns (P.O. Box 640531, San Francisco, CA 94164-0531), 135 pages.

Situation #14, edited by Mark Wallace (10402 Ewell Ave., Kensington, MD 20895).