



WITZ

A Journal of Contemporary Poetics

Henry Gould on "The Sense of Being Right"

We live in a climate of dogmatic Differences which engender their own local abstrusities and rhetorical sleights of hand...The poet and the literary person have become so mediated by markets, institutions, and conventional phenomena that the particular possibilities of an engaged independent voice are no longer even recognized. We hear the roar...

Conference Reports

Franklin Bruno at the
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Readings and Reviews

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WITZ

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"The Sense of Being Right"

By Henry Gould

1

Osip Mandelstam (the Russian poet to whom I refer and defer with what many must consider excessive frequency) once defined poetry as "the sense of being right," or "the poet's inner rightness." This aphorism sounds like a riddle. Is there something more here than protective camouflage—the expression of Mandelstam's lonely battle with Stalin? I would say there is. And I would like to use this gnomic definition as a springboard for some general considerations — which are actually local applications — regarding current poetry in the United States.

Mandelstam provided clues to its meaning in other places. He credited Acmeism, the poetic "style" or "movement" of which he was a co-founder, with having re-introduced a moral element into Russian poetry. He claimed that this was achieved by Acmeism's focus on the idea of Man — not Man as citizen, but Man simply as Man. The *idea*, that is — in a vague, non-gender- or otherwise-specific sense. A dangerous, unparticular, philosophical vagueness. . .

Of course, such expressions of anthropomorphism are only a beginning. From our bus seat at the back of a millenium, I would like to talk about the ends of poetry. I would like to talk about poetry in teleological terms. What is the *telos* — what is the end — of poetry (assuming it's not finished already)? A poet sings — she sings — he sings — they sing — things — together. Mended things, broken things. On one hand, Pindar (Sappho) sings lightly or deeply. . . and the audience gasps in unison. On the other, Tatarunis (Jonas) sings. . . and the audience falls silent (or is not available). Questions are born. My point is that if the *telos* of poetry is something *beyond itself* — some moral aspect of our existence, that aspect to which Mandelstam is alluding — then the audience's present or future group-reception of its respective idealism/skepticism, pride/chastenedness,

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is not the issue. We cannot present poetry's meaning or a particular poet's "importance" by means of historical/cultural categories of "influence" or "importance" which have no inward moral "import". In other words, Mandelstam has gestured toward some kind of imperative, some. . . absolute. Troopers may emphasize this or that historical or sociological aspect within highly complex articulations, perhaps building on similar philosophical foundations; but as poets and/or live critics, we must hustle to describe something far more simple and fundamental.

2

Questions arise. You appear to be in a museum; you are looking at a landscape somewhere. . . France, Corot, Daubigny. Careful delicate deeply instinctually-trained brushwork draws you into a personal emotional intimacy with the earth which no photograph could ever etc. This is something poetry also has difficulty enunciating, if driven by rote scruples or maxims from school (snooty lesson of the *symbolistes*).

But it's part of Mandelstam's lesson too. He says: we no longer need civic poetry (Hugo, Tennyson, Whittier, Longfellow), but something more earthbound — *human* poetry. Yet rather than shun the word "moral", as the Symbolists do, he makes "the sense of being right" poetry's *defining element*.

So the question remains — what is this sense of rightness? We could skip over it by contrasting poetry's *end* (*telos*, purpose) with its *origins*. And say: poetry has a lofty purpose beyond itself, as with all noble aspiration and altruism — but what gives it nobility is its inherent quality as an *activity*. . . (a mixture of moral-aesthetic hot tub treatments meant to introduce the next spongy poet coming along). . .

I would argue instead that origin and end are — the same. Emerging from an obscure personal/trans-personal rightness, not strictly linguistic but meta-linguistic, onto a turning path — sprouting, losing its way, bending toward its own lost way. Pursuing this bent path (from something beyond itself aiming TOWARD something beyond itself) poetry. . . *becomes human*. . .

The Heidegger echo is completely misleading, because I don't want Heidegger/Derrida's planting philosophy on the rock of an abysmal Other. I desire, Poe-like, to plant poetry on the mica of a rationale. The "sense of rightness" is not a Dionysian fervor (though it may be an exaltation). In moral terms (which is the original

framework), I would relate Mandelstam's "sense of rightness" to Aristotle's differentiation between the righteous and the equitable. The "equitable man" goes righteousness one better. ("Your righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, or you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.") The equitable man seeks not righteousness but balance; *giving way*, not demanding full share, out of a recognition of the inherent strife of existence, of love for the common good, of a self-transcending longing.

Step back a moment. Here's a first binary opposition: righteous striving forward, equitable giving way. What motivates this emergence, and division? Something deeper than the forking *sense* of rightness: *rightness itself*. Love, Night, the Monad, the World-Egg, the One. . . obscure unity of both song and righteousness. Heraclitus (reality as a pure, ever-changing fire, an endless strife of energizing opposites) was coming very close. . . yet Strife has its fractal partner too — Love. Antithesis paired with Synthesis. The two ends of the bow held taut — held *together* — by the string. This was Philo's corollary: a dividing/*sharing* Logos (thread). With the Just Man the image — *simulacrum* — of this Logos: aiming for the center, the mediation, the balance of the scales, the unity of the household, or (in Sir Thomas Browne's quaint terminology) the number FIVE (central number, number of justice) in everything. . .

3

We are entering murky waters of mystique — better keep swimming. Is it an anthropomorphic mumbo-jumbo we're looking for, at this late date? Why is the date so late? Because Unity, as a universal concept, is inescapable. Think about it. Everything is part of one. . . *Something*. The struggle of the intelligence — the struggle of both modernism and postmodernism — was against the current of a specious, profane, elitist, totalitarian "engraving" of Unity (idolatry, in other words). But *at this late date* we live in a cultural climate in which Difference is so pervasive — difference and discontinuity — as to constitute a Oneness in its own right, a dogmatic assumption. In the normal course of things, such would be a sign of decadence, the waning of a cultural style. Synthesis, various syntheses — wholeness — may be about to return (new dogmatisms sniffing the well-worn trails).

Let's make an experimental model of a synthesis — say, Poetry. Let's divide Poetry into binary opposites which we know the thing itself manages to synthesize. Then we will impose our model on a slightly more detailed map. We have claimed, with Mandelstam, that

a certain unitary element — the poet's sense of rightness — provides an ultimate form or purpose for poetry — a definition. We will see if the model and the unitary element form any kind of synthesis.

4

A Shorthand Theogony

. . . and out of the primordial *Ooze* of the *One* emerged a parade of pairs. First came *Time*, as the couple *Present* and *Permanent*; then *Life* as *Animate* and *Inanimate*; then *Mind* as *Dream* and *Memory*; then *Self* as *Imagination* and *Experience*; then *Law* as *Spirit* and *Letter*; then *Art* as *Content* and *Form*; then *Language* as *Communication* and *Artifact*. Then *Artifact* gave birth to *Poetry* and *Prose*; and then *Poetry* gave birth to *Drama* and *Text*. And so they filed forth like this:

present / permanent
animate / inanimate
dream / memory
imagination / experience
spirit / letter
form / content
communication / artifact
poetry / prose
drama / text

— some going to the right and some to the left, until they formed two large camps, like this:

present / animate / dream / imagination / spirit
form / communication / poetry / drama

permanent / inanimate / memory / experience
letter / content / artifact / prose / text

Commentary

It should be noted that we are working from a corrupted original which Aristotle was the first to question, followed by many others (Bergos, *Philosophical Notebooks*, Buenos Aires, 1937). Some of the listed concepts might actually belong with different pairings, or the opposite camp entirely. Nevertheless the general drift of our theogony is fairly clear. Poetry emerges in tandem with its Heraclitean opposite prose, and then diverges to form a new whole with its like members — a new compound, mirrored by the second, complementary/antagonistic, whole.

As many scholars have noted, the intriguing break in the

In our genealogical researches, we appear to have done exactly the opposite of what I began by saying it was necessary to do. We have been rooting amongst the tubers, banal minutiae of drab pendency, rather than formulating the simple, the fundamental. Where is the Mandelstamian moral imperative in all this? (Not to mention the specific pressures?)

As a matter of fact, I have withheld an important element of the genealogy for rhetorical purposes. I hope the reader will forgive me. At some point during the murky fog of origins — somewhere between *Time* and *Life* and *Mind* and *Self* (or *Imagination*?) a new anomaly took place. A pair emerged *on their own* — in isolation from the rest (entering from stage left, I think). This pair shared so many characteristics that one could mistake them for identical twins. They were *Voice* and *Timber*. They were almost identical — yet not-identical; and they made a sound — not quite in unison, not quite in harmony, not quite in dissonance — a sound of grainy speaking-singing. Some said they emerged clattering out of a cave. Others claimed it was Venus on a half-shell with her wooden mirror. But these were mere speculations after the fact. The fact was the sheer creaking *impact* of that sound. It was the sound of someone bowing; of a voice *testing* dry wood, flexing the bend; and, at the same time, of stray *wood* becoming *song*. Was it two strains grafted into one?

More description of the phenomenon will only further obscure the already-liminal dusk at end of day. But I believe that particular sound-continuum was the sound Mandelstam heard, as he muttered his lines to himself, walking around frozen Voronezh or gloomy Petersburg. It was the sound-impulse driving Dickinson to concentrate her forces. The whisper Dante trailed after on his goat-paths. The droning Shakespeare heard continually (a continuum, rather than a synthesis) as he undertook his orchestrations. Finally, it was the *sound* that paired itself with *silence*, as they moved off together toward the vanishing point.

Providence
8.5.97

*With respect to mathematical recursiveness and related topics, I am indebted to the remarkable study by John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges and the analytical detective story* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996).

Conference Reports

Against the Impossibility of Literary Community: The First Annual Conference of The College of Neglected Science

By Franklin Bruno

I

"That the College of Neglected Science, after a long gestation, should have presented itself to the world and that the World should have presented itself to the College, does that not in itself represent a fall from grace and a kind of dilution of its neglected essence?...And since for a college such as ours existence is little more than a barely necessary evil, we are not reluctant to share [this] opinion if it were not precisely this evil - by virtue of the contradiction it implies - which appears capable of perfecting the deeply neglected character of the College."

With this rather Parmenidean defense, the College of Neglected Science (CONS) was convened on June 13, 1992 by poets Paul Vangelisti and Robert Crosson (the College's 'Custodians') on the occasion of the installation of the 'Collage of Neglected Science' (comprised of Vangelisti's manuscripts and twelve coats of polyurethane) in a Los Angeles home. However, mere existence has done relatively little to raise the College's profile, the main tangible evidence of its activities being *Ribot*, the journal which bills itself as the College's annual report.

It would be contrary to the spirit of CONS and its "perpetually absent faculty" to lay entirely bare its debt to a similarly quixotic organization, the College de 'Pataphysique (C'P). Clearly, both Colleges mock both traditional academic/literary bodies and their image in the heroic avant-garde, as exemplified by Breton's mania for exclusions from the Surrealist group. It is more easily imaginable

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that a poet or painter might be expelled from these 'schools' for excessive scrupulousness than for unorthodoxy. However, it is the differences from the earlier (and still extant) organization that are most suggestive of the newer college's shadowy agenda and its particularly contemporary character.

First, although the "yet to be named" status of CONS' Board of Trustees mirrors the continued vacancy of the C'P's highest post (that of "Curator"), it also acknowledges the undesirability (not to mention unlikelihood) of external institutional support, public or private, for its activities. Also, where the titles of C'P's officials tend toward the mock-heroic (Raymond Queneau served as the College's "Transcendental Satrap"), CONS' are mock-humble—*Ribot's* masthead lists a few in each issue, including "tailor," "electrician," and "nurse (retired)." (Robert Zachary, the CONS' librarian, has admitted that the College has no library.) Most significant is the difference between 'pataphysics (variously defined as the "science of imaginary solutions" or "the science of exceptions") and the discipline(s) that constitute Neglected Science. In the C'P's "Inaugural Harangue", I. L. Sandomir stated: "There could not be more 'pataphysics in the world than there is, because it already is all that there is." Contrast this with Vangelisti and Crosson's commencement address: "The seriousness of God and government, the usefulness of services and administrations, the gravity and weight of teachings and systems are only antithetical to neglected science because they will not and cannot proclaim themselves to be neglected." If 'pataphysics is an invented discipline, Neglected Science is a re-invented one, encompassing all that is deemed excessive or inutile by those institutions which insist too strenuously on their own necessity. If 'pataphysics concerns implausibility, Neglected Science concerns impossibility. If this concern manifests itself by flying in the face of impossibility and becoming actual, so much the better.

Ribot, CONS' 'official' publication, is the latest in Vangelisti's continuing series of editorial projects, which include *Invisible City* (with John McBride, 1971-81) and *Boxcar* (with the late Leland Hickman, 2 issues in 1983). Where the tabloid-sized *Invisible City*, impossible to read in public without calling attention to oneself, served its moment by demonstrating, often convincingly, the vitality of an international literary underground, *Ribot* is quite literally 'downsized,' a narrow volume of roughly the dimensions of a *Zagat's* for a moderately-sized city, easily secreted upon one's person. The modesty of the journal's scale, and the self-contained brevity of many of its contribu-

tions, reflect a view of the furtive, particulate manner in which literary production and distribution currently proceeds. (*Ribot*, as any number of journals, has had an unwitting ally in enacting its own secrecy, in the form of what we must gloss here as "the death of the independent bookseller" and "the dependence of distributors and publishers on large chains.")

These concerns are not new. In the preface to a 1973 anthology of Los Angeles poets, Vangelisti states, "An Italian poet who, like me, also edits a poetry magazine, wrote wanting to know what line my magazine was pursuing. I said that here much of what he might call 'art' was mostly an accident and one couldn't afford a program or destination." Though there is something to this, whether we take 'here' to be America or Southern California, it is clear that certain elements animate Vangelisti's successively shrinking magazines—an international focus, an insistence on the centrality of translation to poetic practice, an emphasis on visual/verbal hybrids, and a concern with the effects of adjacent or successive works upon one another. All these themes continue to be sung in *Ribot* in a minor key, informed by a cleansing neglect.

II

Given its diffidence (even pessimism) toward its own existence, I was surprised to receive an announcement of CONS' first 'professional meeting,' to be held May 2-3 on Catalina Island, famously "26 miles across the sea" from San Pedro Harbor. Said announcement was accompanied by a call for work for *Ribot* 5 on the stated theme of the conference—"history, in either pre-historic or post historic-forms," not to exceed a single page, also to be read (or, in the case of visual work, displayed) at the conference.

Only upon arrival at a resort hotel fairly well set off from the main tourist life of the island (snorkeling, small boat rentals, many restaurants with identical menus) did the thirty-eight attendees discover the conference's format, which sat somewhere between an academic conference/panel, a stockholder's meeting, and a session of the U.N. general assembly. Three three-hour sessions were held over two days, each under a broad rubric ("Beauty," "Form," and "History/Politics") and a moderator, who introduced the session with a few leading remarks. Several long conference tables were set in a hollow rectangle, so that everyone could see and be seen by everyone else, with a microphone for recording the proceedings hanging like a plumb line at the assembly's center. Each participant was given three minutes

to address the subject at hand (or to "pass"), after which the floor was thrown open, with minimal interference from the moderator. (The isolation of the site also contributed to the relaxed character of the conference: with tourist season some weeks away, the poets and artists had the run of the hotel's facilities—that is, the pool and the bar.)

The extemporaneous nature of the proceedings and the level of abstraction of the subjects addressed make it impossible to do justice here to over nine hours of animated discussion, blind alleys, and genuine insights. Still, some main themes can be teased out of each session. Dennis Phillips began Friday afternoon's session, "Beauty: Transgression or Accommodation," with seventeen questions modulating from "Is the issue of beauty either as transgression or accommodation a relevant issue...to the making of art and poetry now?" and "Is there an attempt to tie ideas of beauty to ideas of emotion?" to the more pointed "Can the equation of beauty with dissonance threaten those with an interest in control? Why?" and "If a commercial use of beauty is related to exploitation, what use of beauty is not?" Inevitably, given that the assembled body was finding its collective feet in this first session, most of these issues were collapsed into one: "What is beauty?" or, perhaps, "What do we mean by beauty?"

Strategies used to address this question included off-the-cuff discursion (Douglas Messerli's insistence on beauty as residing first in process), prepared statements and poems (notably Norma Cole's "My Operatives": "This eye looks elsewhere...This vividness you see but do not see."), citations (Martha Ronk read from Freud on screen memory), performative acts (the pouring of water from one cup into several others from various heights, perhaps intended to answer a question of Phillips' on the musicality of language), one-liners (Robert Crosson: "Beauty is the beast we celebrate!"), anecdote (one visual artist told of giving up on this question upon discovering that he began to find paintings beautiful as he learned of their economic progress within the gallery system). Avery E.D. Burns offered a series of non-answers to Phillips' questions that alluded to the conditions of the conference: "Remember the name of the person across from you." "How is *your* room?" and, in reference to something most of us had seen on our ferry ride to the island, "Dolphins...more dolphins," which became a concrete, if conventional, point of departure for further discussion of the conditions for, or conditioning of, beauty. One problematic feature of this session was a persistent conflation of 'beauty in nature' and 'beauty in art' (i.e. representation). Jacques Debrot

(from Boston, the conference's most far-flung participant) neatly revealed this by noting that though many of us might find the dolphins "beautiful," we might take a different view of a painter's depiction of the same "on black velvet, let's say."

Though this session was a useful icebreaker, more fruitful ground was covered on Saturday. Standard Schaefer opened "Form-Inform-Deform," the morning's session, by juxtaposing Ray DiPalma's dictum that "all form is coercive" with several lines by Jack Spicer on Allen Ginsberg, from *A Book of Magazine Verse*:

At least we both know how shitty the world is. You wearing a beard as a mask to disguise it. I wearing my tired smile. I don't see how you do it. One hundred thousand university students marching with you. Toward
A necessity which is not love but is a name.

The suggestion that Spicer might be read as critical of the (coercive?) *form* of Ginsberg's activism elicited a range of responses. Several participants questioned whether "coercive" (or "persuasive") need be read as embodying a value-judgement. Must work with these characteristics be rejected as politically or poetically regressive? As George Albon commented, a distinction can be made between "rhetoric, and mere rhetoric." Douglas Messerli articulated the view that forms (or genres) are destructively coercive only when left unquestioned, a position amplified by Dennis Phillips, who spoke of a poetic approach that attempts to block a *sentimental* response to whatever formal strategies are present in the work.

Gary Kern gave a useful synopsis of Victor Shlovsky's model of the exhaustion of forms in terms of the *Frankenstein* films, which led to a discussion of the question of how and to what degree 'showing one's hand' (or laying bare one's formal devices) is permissible within advertising and mass media. Nathaniel Tarn noted that the most urgent information on the evening news resides in commercials, which reveal the national prevalence of gastro-intestinal distress. Martha Ronk cut through this relatively familiar litany of complaint with a challenge: "I think we're not talking about form, because it's really hard. It's easy for us to be smug about what we see on television and what we know about capitalism instead of doing what we're supposed to be doing and talking about how we use form in the work that we do." This led to a more interesting (to me) discussion of the question of to what degree we, as writers in non-received, or at least less famil-

iar, forms are willing to show *our* own hands in the interest of giving a possibly 'uninitiated' audience a foothold. Leslie Scalapino spoke revealingly of the roots of her practice as squarely *against* received forms (of language and attention). Of opposition, she said, "I want it to be *thorough!*"

For the final session, "History/Politics: Re-Evaluating the Audience," Paul Vangelisti changed the format slightly. Instead of on-the-spot statements, participants were asked to read their pieces from the then-forthcoming number of *Ribot*. Since most of this material is now available (though a few participants published something other than what they read), I won't gloss it here, except to note that, as in the magazine, the tensions generated by adjacent readings were as much 'to the point' as the material itself. (I was pleased to find my own skeptical attempt to grapple with 'the post-historical' in terms of causation and Inkan mysticism sandwiched between Martin Nakell's meditation on "first language" and "thusness" and Will Alexander's lucid polemic on the African origins of the human species.) *Ribot's* "generalist" and art editor Don Suggs showed slides of much of the visual work to be reproduced. I think that there was general agreement that the integration of work and contributions of visual artists into the conference was not ideal. This was no one's fault—everyone was surprised, though perhaps we shouldn't have been, at the difficulty of finding a common ground to discuss the way that the conference's fairly abstract concerns inform media with vastly different concrete conditions. (The published version manages to place writers and artists on a more equal footing, especially with respect to visuals created expressly for the magazine, perhaps because of the strict page-per-contributor constraint of the current issue.)

After this prepared material, there was further open discussion of marginality, the situation of independent publishing, and the political efficacy of innovative work (with Guy Bennett speaking eloquently of the political failures of Marinetti, Mayakovsky, and Aragon). These discussions were reliably energetic, but too diffuse to distill as I have attempted to do above. Generally, the "what was said" of the conference was less significant than the fact that it took place at all. While a two-day island of activity, in and on which established and emerging writers could at least attempt to speak to one another about the conditions of their work in a not-merely-academic setting, may not be a 'paraphysical Brigadoon, it is too rare a formation in the vast Pacific of malign neglect for its existence, or at least its repeatability, to go undoubted.

EyeRhymes: A Report

By Douglas Barbour

In early 1997, this advertisement was sent out via various media:

EYE RHYMES, 12 to 16 June 1997, a multi-disciplinary, international conference on Visual Poetry at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. The organizers invite proposals for papers dealing with various aspects of the historical and contemporary interface between literature and the visual arts. EyeRhymes is open to presentations made in other media. The organizers are especially interested in soliciting papers dealing with Canadian visual poetry, as well as obtaining proposals from creative practitioners. A creative component will accompany the conference, with exhibitions, performances, and panel discussions involving visual poets. The working language of EyeRhymes will be English. Additional information, concerning publication and other details, will be provided in future communications.

It was nothing if not ambitious. And, incredibly enough, the conference went off more or less as proposed—which is a source of wonder to all (including myself) who were involved in putting it together. In my usual fashion I tried to keep a journal of the proceedings as I saw them, which means that what follows has a limited perspective, but may, I hope, give some sense of the terrific encounter EyeRhymes became.

It began officially on Thursday afternoon, June 12, with the opening of the first of 3 exhibitions, *Wordsounz & Eye Rhymes: visual poetry and artist books*, that John Charles organized at the Bruce Peel Special Collections library: it had works by such conferees as Johanna Drucker, as well as by such Canadians as the late bpNichol. Early in the evening Dick Higgins gave the keynote address. It was a rambling trip through the history & present situation of pattern poetry, with slides, and quite charming in its way. Not least because he is such an obsessive, a man possessed by his interest. And there is something winning about such obsessions when they are ones you appreciate. Later, there was the opening of *ImageNations*: an exhibition of visual

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poetry from around the world—some great stuff to look at, in various media, & then three readings, beginning with Bob Cobbing, who although aging still has his chops & uses his great voice wonderfully. Clemente Padin from Uruguay, with the help of a translator, did a set of conceptual works, acting out instructions, sounding some things, & generally playing a humorous game with linguistic concepts, a kind of court jester to language. He finished with a choral work for the audience, sounding various vowels loud & soft, which everyone got into. Mykola Myroshnychenko, of Ukraine, gave a much quieter & more traditional reading, but a fascinating one in its way, partly because of the unknown (to me) language. (There was in fact a large contingent from Ukraine, which was featured on Saturday; this was part of chief organizer Jars Balan's larger plan for the conference: to give writers & critics from Ukraine a connection to what had been happening elsewhere over the past few decades.)

Friday set the tone for the conference as a whole. It was Canada day. The first set of papers included an interesting one on Robert Zend's work by Stephen Cain; Darren-Wershler-Henry & Christian Bök doing a stereo presentation on both panels of Steve McCaffery's *Carnival*. Brilliant & a *tour de force*, which we came to associate with them. Craig Saper, from the University of Pennsylvania, gave a paper on the Assembling Movement in Canada in the 1970s. Fred Wah then performed the new poems he had written to/for Bev Tosh's paintings, while she performed a kind of movement as a white 'puppet' figure against the projections of her paintings, often finding stances that 'collaborated' with them brilliantly, although she said after that she couldn't really see them.

During the lunch break, we had arranged a screening of *Sons of Captain Poetry*, Michael Ondaatje's 1970 documentary film about bpNichol. It's rarely seen, so everyone stayed to watch. The ending, which I had forgotten, was bp singing his elegy for Hugo Ball then climbing back out through the broken windows (that are an Ondaatje iconic trademark; & were even then). But now that elegy is tragically self-referential, & I was in tears, & not alone in that. But there were also all his comments on poetics, which even at that young age were so right, so on, & still so ignored by so many.

The papers on bp seemed to flow right on from that. Carl Peters of Simon Fraser was a little self-indulgent in his discussion of bp, concrete & allegory, but made some good points despite rambling too long & too much. Peter Jaeger, who just finished his PhD at Western on bp, did a good job of exploring what goes on in *ABC the*

aleph beth book. And Graham Sharpe, who's doing his MA on Ganglia/grOnk Press, told us a great deal about the archive at Simon Fraser, & what he's finding there, & how it helps define exactly what the press, barrie's own wee effort, did. After a break, Marvin Sackner, another true obsessive, explained at great length but with winning charm, how he's slowly creating a new multimedia database for the Ruth & Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete & Visual Poetry. Stephen Scobie then introduced Darren & Christian for a reading. Christian has memorized a lot of the dada classics & did a few—very fast; he also read/performed from *Crystallography* & an amazing new work in which he is writing five separate pieces in which all the words therein use only one vowel, from a through u. More tours de force. Darren was quieter, but read some fine pieces from *Nicholodeon*, & a new piece he semi dedicated to me, which played variations on a series of offbeat titles with cultural studies connotations & was very witty & intelligent. And we thought, boy these youngsters are really challenging us.

That evening we had the final opening, at Latitude 53, of *Cantextualities: Contemporary Canadian Visual Poetry*. Some wonderful stuff in the show, including works by Paul Dutton, W. Mark Sutherland, & a number of Albertans. There were performances. Wayne Defehr with guitarist Ian Birse, & slides by a woman who photographed his poems, went first. It was, um, interesting, but his piece on preparing a woman for burial did not go over that well, partly because no one heard him say 'my mother,' & even so, there was something that bothered many, a kind of sense of necrophilia, which apparently he is not trying for. W. Mark Sutherland, from Toronto, went next & he can do a lot with his voice, although he was apparently 'freaked out' because he's used to working with a mike, & there wasn't one in that small space. He had some incredible sounds anyway, & some nifty pieces. But the gallery was very hot, & close. Stephen & I, as Re: Sounding, were on next, & we seemed to go over ok; we pushed the abstract soundings a bit, given the company we had. Paul Dutton went last & he has some incredible pieces, including the amazing 'Stereo Head,' which does what it says & sounded great even without microphones. He blew everyone away. So it was a good evening of sound, even if we were all sweating like pigs.

Saturday covered the visual poetry of eastern Europe, where there is a long tradition of pattern poetry. We attended the first set of talks, & they were interesting, although we got there late & missed the intro to a fascinating sound poet, Rea Nikonovna, a tape of whose performance we heard. Jars spoke about Mykola Myroshnychenko

& how he came to discover concrete, although his work is still quite naive. And Tatiana Nazarenko gave us an overview of contemporary visual poetry in Russia & Ukraine. That evening, some of the poets showed us their work: one of the older heroines of Austrian poetry, Elizabeth Netzkowa read & had read some of her work, & played tapes of some more, very moody, elegiac, with soprano sax obbligato, but quite powerful; & she, in her quiet dignity, was impressive, although what she did was perform poetry, not sound poetry, a form of 'interpretation.' Bodyvoice, a local improv dance group, did a short & quite powerful group dance, Untying My Tongue, in which parts of words were used as percussion.

Sunday, the longest day of all, the rest of the world was brought in. Brian Reed of Stanford started out with a very intelligent look at *Visual Minimalism and Interpretive Maximalism: John Ashbery's "Litany" and Resistance to Visual Poetry in the American Academy*. This session was a delight to chair. Stephen then read from the chapter on Ian Hamilton Finlay in his forthcoming book on visual poetry etc. Very solid, very interesting. Francis Edeline (Centre d'études poétiques in Belgium) showed a number of slides of Finlay's & Timm Ulrich's visual poetry: another overview, but very helpful with the pictures. At the next session, Klaus Groh struggled with his english to introduce us to some traditions which back up his own work. He was charming & came up with one term, a neologism, many of us immediately loved: 'trace-catching.' He also said "an art work is like a battery," although I didn't quite follow how it was in his talk. Craig Dworkin, working just from notes, gave a superbly intelligent talk on *The Use of Overprinting Considered in Terms of Information Theory and Post-Structural Linguistics*, with some evocative transparencies. In the early afternoon, Bohdan Nebesio talked about intertitles in silent cinema, Clement Padin used his own work to try to come to some views of a rhetoric of visual poetry. Jesper Olsson of Sweden, another grad student, told us a lot about the concrete poetry scene in Sweden in the 50s & 60s; background that helped fill in a missing history, nicely done.

Late afternoon, Adele J. Haft, who is a classical scholar now interested in map-poems, introduced us to them & asked for more; many had some to tell her about. She's a nice person, who taught in Canada for awhile early in her career, so she knew a lot of Canadian concrete. Claus Clüver of Indiana talked about what he called Kinetic poetry, poetry that moves & moves its audience in participation; he

had many examples. Johanna Drucker spoke very wittily about the ways much concrete poetry used letters differently than she does in her *The Word Made Flesh*; her wearing of weird glasses & general stance & delivery turned her lecture into a delightful and charming performance. Great fun, & provocative, although she did tend to choose clear examples (no Finlay, whose subtle ironies might in fact connect with what she is doing).

We'd been at it since 0830, but there was another session before supper: Willard Bohn on *Jose Juan Tablada and his Visual Poems in the Context of the Mexican avant-garde*: an intriguing introduction to someone I had never heard of. And Owen Smith told us about Fluxus by performing a number of Fluxus pieces, & well too. After supper, Dave Baptiste Chirot rambled most intelligently about two of his influences, Kruchonyk & Robert Grenier, with very interesting references to wwilliams's poetics. He had to stop a bit before he had said all he wanted to, but he was so charmingly involved with his materials that no one begrudged him the extra time he took. John White of U of London had some very interesting things to say about *Indexical Signs in Futurist Shaped Poetry*, much of which apparently agrees with Stephen's interpretations in his book. We were by this time tired but stayed around for a couple of creative presentations. Jan Davis of Australia showed a series of slides of her collection of artist books on the Solomon Islands, which were beautiful & more, but in which she didn't seem to come to grips with some of the political problematics she seemed aware of in her talk. Johanna Bartl of Germany opened a collection of boxes & laid out their changing contents (heavy 'pages' with shifting designs that connected among all ten boxes in various patterns).

The final presentations on Monday morning were on computer art/poetry, holopoetry, & visual poetics & innovative communication technology, by Patrick-Henri Burgaud, who showed us videos of his computer art, which was very colorful & delightful, Eduardo Kak, who has been doing holographic poetry for more than a decade now, some of it deliberately meant to offer each eye slightly different views of letters etc., & Eric Vos, who knows the contemporary technology scene & its possibilities very well. Two people devoted to artist books & collecting brought the conference to a close: Martha Carothers talked about signs, & capital letters, what she called visual essays. She quoted a satire of dumbing down from 1951 that actually did sound very contemporary. Then Judith Hoffberg, of Umbrella Editions in California, & a real fan of all this stuff, enthused about three artists

she admires for breaking away from the norm. Such enthusiasm was a great way to end the official part of the conference. We all went off to the Faculty Club for lunch, & some talk after about possibly setting up an association or at least trying to arrange another conference in a few years. Jars was left to follow some ideas up & help us all keep in touch.

In one sense the conference wasn't fully over. Bob Cobbing, W. Mark Sutherland, & Paul Dutton did three more performances, in Red Deer, Calgary, & Banff, where Re: Sounding also performed. And there was a big reading by the Ukrainian poets, in Ukrainian, at the Ukrainian Canadian Archives and Museum in Edmonton. In another sense, it will never be over. Jars told me that the Russians & the Ukrainians had been totally knocked out by the art shows & the performances of sound poetry, which had opened both their eyes & ears to possibilities they had not had access to until very recently. That had been one of his hopes for the conference. I also know that people like Dave Baptiste Chiro, not to mention Marvin Sackner, had made contacts with poets in those countries that will likely lead to further exchanges. And there is a strong desire that another such conference take place, possibly in Europe, in another few years. So, in general, EyeRhymes could be called a success both artistically & critically, & it had always been a central design of the thing that both those aspects feature equally.

Even if I was one of the convenors, I think I can say that EyeRhymes was a success. Not to go beyond the obvious: that Jars Balan (a concrete poet, himself, among other things, with many connections in Ukraine) was the moving force, & did most of the work; that Peter Bartl (who teaches design) also did a lot, as did the various students & support staff over in the Department of Art & Design, including Sue Coberg (a designer of bookcovers for SUNY Press among others). My role was not difficult: I just had to be there, & pick up a few people at the airport, & enjoy myself & moderate a few sessions. Anyway, as far as I can tell most of the participants thought it went very well; was well organized (it always looks more chaotic from the inside, I guess). And there was a lot of good stuff during the weekend.

Readings and Reviews

Out from Behind the Mask

NOTHING THE SUN COULD NOT EXPLAIN: 20 CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN POETS. MICHAEL PALMER, RÉGIS BONVICINO AND NELSON ASCHER, EDs.
(SUN & MOON PRESS, 1997).

Reviewed by Guy Bennett

This new bilingual anthology brings together three generations of poets whose work encompasses the major trends in Brazilian poetry of the last thirty years. The English translations (by, among others, Michael Palmer, Dana Stevens and Regina Alfarano, with revisions by Robert Creeley) read beautifully throughout, conveying the subtleties in nuance and tone of the entire range of Portuguese originals, presented en face. Beginning with work from the Tropicalist movement of the 1960s and proceeding up through the poetry of the present day, editors Michael Palmer, Régis Bonvicino and Nelson Ascher (the latter two are among the poets represented here) follow the trajectory of contemporary, "post-concrete" Brazilian poetry.

In light of the austere, often impersonal concrete poetry that dominated the Brazilian scene in the 1950s, the poetry presented here is strikingly personal and familiar. It turns away from the rigorous visual and formal investigations of Concretism, focusing instead on the lyric. Save two visual pieces, which seem oddly out of place in this context, the anthology is characterized by a thorough exploration of the short verse form.

Though the brief lyric is indeed the basic poetic unit here, the work as a whole is surprisingly diverse, thanks to thoughtful experimentation on the part of many of the poets. From the compact verbal constructions of Paulo Leminski, to the expansive pieces by Josely Vianna Baptista, to the elongated lines and broken rhythms of Waly Salomão, a number of distinct voices can be heard, creating a variety that enriches the entire collection. While various formal approaches are evident, stylistically and thematically the poetry seems to gravitate around two poles: on the one hand, that of a straightforward, colloquial poetry often marked by strong anti-esthetic

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tendencies; on the other, an introspective, self-conscious poetry that frequently examines the issues of language and writing, and in doing so, dialogues widely with other literatures and cultures.

The former mode, typical of both the Tropicalist and "marginal" poetries of the '60s and '70s, is exemplified by the work of a number of poets, notably Torquato Neto, Paulo Leminski, and Ana Cristina Cesar. These poets – some of whom have written song lyrics for such giants of the Tropicalist movement as Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil – share a taste for the familiar and the quotidian, for an informal language resonating in a distinctly urban ethos. Perhaps under the influence of Brazilian pop music, their poems often resemble love songs gone wrong, marked as they are by a underlying pessimism and sense of despair, as in the following poem by Ana Cristina Cesar:

it's very clear
love is here
to stay
on this open veranda
night falls over the city
under construction
on the small constriction
on your breast
anguish of happiness
car headlights
slashing time
road works
at rest
a sudden recoil from the plot

In the hands of Paulo Leminski, one of the more compelling poets presented here, these fragile lyrics collapse in on themselves, taking on an intensity, at times a brutality, that is attenuated only by brief flashes of humor and self-deprecating irony. An unforgiving sarcasm, felt in much of the work, finds its champion in Leminski. Though he began writing concrete poetry, he soon developed a highly personal style, flavored by the counter-culture that increasingly shaped both him and his work. A powerful, original voice, he moves from haiku-like concision ("moon / did you shine like this / over achwitz") to rhetorically-flavored compositions that border on syllogism, like the piece from which the anthology takes its name: "nothing the sun / could not explain // everything the moon / makes glamorous // no

rain / fades this flower." Or, more potent still, the following poem:

once
we were going to be homer
the work an iliad no less

later
things got tougher
we could maybe manage a rimbaud
an ungaretti some fernando pessoa
a lorca a ginsberg an éluard

finally
we ended up the minor provincial poet
we were always
hiding behind the many masks
time treated as flowers

In counterpoint to this self-abasing, self-effacing poetry sounds a second, complimentary voice, one fully aware of its status as literary fact and of its place within the broader context of international poetry. As many of the poets here are translators (namely, Duda Machado, Júlio Castañón Guimarães, Régis Bonvicino, Josely Vianna Baptista, Nelson Ascher, and Carlito Azevedo), their work reflects the polyglot world in which it lives. Throughout the anthology one hears echoes of Mallarmé (Ana Cristina Cesar's "Nothing, This Foam"), Lorca (Paulo Leminski's "Greenery"), Rimbaud (Duda Machado's "Traveling Theater"), Baudelaire and Eliot (Carlos Ávila's "Baudelaire In The Sun" and "Narcissus Poeticus"), among others. Frequent allusions to still other writers and artists – as in Régis Bonvicino's "The Disorder of" – serve as hyperlinks to a vast, intercultural network connecting Brazilian poetry to the various "foreign" literatures that inspire and inform it.

This literary self-consciousness is apparent on the textual level in a pronounced fixation with writing and language, a leitmotif that runs throughout this collection. While some poems openly treat the issue of literary production – as the Leminski poem quoted above – others take a more subtle approach, addressing the question obliquely, or from a safe metaphorical distance, revealing in the process a sense of disillusionment and distrust, as if the poem were somehow limited by its own writing or, worse still, by language itself, a paradoxical but

not uncommon thematic that reaches back beyond the -isms of the historical avant-garde – the ancestral voices of the present writers – to the Symbolist poetics in which it is rooted (one recalls Tyutchev's "expressed thought is a lie"). Here is Horácio Costa's "Natural History":

Behind the taxidermist, there's the straw,
behind the rhinoceros, the savannah,
behind this writing only the night,
night which gallops to the fore.

The moon leaps from the butterfly's wing,
the sun shines on the head of a pin,
a black sun thrums through these lines,
star now rising on the horizon.

The desiccated animal of syntax
furnishes the word, the frame and the label
of a collection deader than the dead.

In the natural history collection
the visiting reader pauses alongside
shining mammals and insects.

This poem, with its images of death and darkness, taxidermy and collecting, could be read as a metaphor for the ossification of literature through its own creation and its inevitable incorporation into the historicizing and classifying discourse of those cultural taxidermists, the critics and academics. While the third stanza succinctly reveals the mechanism at work ("The desiccated animal of syntax / furnishes the word, the frame and the label / of a collection deader than the dead."), the first stanza telescopes this stultifying process in reverse, passing from the preservationist, to the living animal, to the writing, to the night from which it issued, the true degree zero of the poem. That Costa expresses this inverted disappearing act as a sonnet, and titles it "Natural History," adds an additional irony to the poem.

I don't want to give the impression that Brazilian poetry, as represented by this anthology, is hopelessly morose or unabashedly cynical. On the contrary, there is an undeniable exuberance to much of the work, a freshness and vibrancy that resonates throughout, though tempered at times with biting irony. Interestingly, this exuberance is

best expressed in quiet, still-life-like poems, those exploring a closed, intimate space in which they celebrate the potential joy – if fragile and transitory – of the moment at hand. These pieces are often characterized by a strong sensuality that seems to spill out of the imagery, filling the poem and the reader. They range from the overtly sexual "What Was Lost?" by Júlio Castañon Guimarães and "Machines" by Nelson Ascher, to the indeterminate eroticism of Claudia Roquette-Pinto's "Chestnuts, Women":

if opened
with the surprising skill
of small hands
blind to such an alphabet
and if – itself brown –
the patch of skin bruises
even more than from foolish thorns
see how
the bud throbs:
she and she
unbuttons
between the fingers

The lushness of these lines, coupled with the fleeting, sensuous brilliance of the imagery – qualities common to many of the poems featured in *Nothing The Sun Could Not Explain* – reveal yet another aspect of contemporary Brazilian poetry that should not go unmentioned: that of an intensely beautiful, mentally tactile writing that "unbuttons between the fingers" of the attentive reader.

Provisional Comfort

THE FUZZY LOGIC SERIES BY JOE ROSS (TEXTURE PRESS, 1996)

Reviewed by Mark DuCharme

The split between intellect and emotion has long been a primary opposition within Western culture. This split itself seems mocked by the title of Joe Ross's new chapbook, *The Fuzzy Logic Series*. While poetry has conventionally been understood to use emotions as primary sources—and thus to partake of what could pejoratively be termed a “fuzzy logic,” or subjectivity, as its central methodology—this stance has increasingly been called into question since the 1970s, when poetry, and particularly the poetry of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E moment, has been just as likely to be viewed as the deconstruction of systems of discourse, or as a critique of the role of the emotive ego as site and arbiter of poetic experience. What's interesting about Ross's chapbook is that both the lyric and the intellectual seem to come into play, but neither is allowed to dominate. Ross thus is able to create an intellectual poetry not strictly engaged in the project of critique (something that would hold the danger of making his work a rehash of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E praxis) and a lyrical poetry unconstrained by the limits of the lyric convention. Ross's book thus is an important marker on webs currently being sketched as outward trajectories from the heady poetic destabilizations of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetics.

I am secretly telling everyone
that everything's open but that
what's closed. And how simple
logic disintegrates upon
too simple conversation.

The irreverence of mock-intellectual asides and the funny, disjointed syntax of “too simple conversation” destabilize the poetic boundaries of a lyricism that might otherwise become too infatuated with its own intensity or coyness, reducing itself, as the poem later tells us, to “a personal fetish that / I might regale you with.” Though partly destabilized, Ross's lyrics remain more intact, more stable, than the ritualistic dismantlings characteristic of works by

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i, a series (Burning Press) and *Three Works* (Invasive Map) (Oasia).

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E practitioners. For example, the “I” throughout the series is plausible as a cohering “voice,” and materials seemingly from the narrator's life are treated with a candor that neither lyrically aggrandizes nor intellectually dismisses them for trivialness.

The forty poems of Ross's series are all titled. The individual titles themselves suggest the concert of the work, and tend to reflect back on the series' title (and its implied thematic baggage) often more than they do the “individual” poems below them. Many of the titles are descriptive, grammatical, literary or analytic terms: “SEMANTICS,” “PARATAXIS,” “DIACRITICAL MARKS,” “END STOP,” “ENJAMBMENT,” “PROOF MARKS,” “PARALLEL CONSTRUCTION,” “PARENTHETICAL ASIDE,” “NARRATIVITY,” “CONTINUITY,” “CIRCULAR LOGIC,” “SUMMARY STATEMENT,” “RESOLUTION,” “FIGURE,” “FORMS,” etc. This feature of the work at once enforces the reader's awareness that these poems exist in an intellectual, as much as an emotional, context, while foregrounding the functionality, not so much of the individual poems, as of language that embodies them. Thus, any reading of these (often) personal and demotic lyrics as “simply” personal or lyrical is immediately problematized. At the same time, the wonderful directness and freshness of these poems undermines any reading which would tokenize them in terms merely of the intellectual. Ross's work, then, mandates its own poetic “fuzzy logic,” one which contradicts itself on strictly logical grounds, but is finally necessary toward the poems' apprehension. Or, to put it another way—*The Fuzzy Logic Series* can be read as enactment of a kind of Keatsian “*Negative Capability*,” in that both the intellectual and the emotional ramifications of these poems are continuously made manifest, and continuously undermine one another's attempted sovereignty. Thus, the reader is forced to dwell in the tensions between these poles, averring “any irritable reaching after fact or reason,” as Keats had it, as well as any convenient avoidance of the work's intellectual focus.

FOCUS

So there I was just all shaking and shit while
waiting for the next good excuse to jump
out of the magazine I was reading on the care
and feeding post service-age economies

when I couldn't decipher the next image
of what I knew had to be of motion. So
I re-ran my tapes of all the Popeye cartoons
and decided it best just to run out of time,
this time for good. Meanwhile the cathedral
on the hill was waiting as military choppers flew passed [sic]
and the Asian man started singing but no words came out.
So I decided it best to nap and count fireflies
descending upon doves with crested shields saying
something like, "we're good honest hard working people."
And we know that clouds cover nothing and that's a fact
gleaned from hazy treetops in early fall or seen in the small
type scrolled by at the end of car commercials or
warnings by pharmaceutical companies.
And still we all waited.
And since we haven't yet figured out how to read
the gestures of the good Senator from _____ we
lit our ice cream cones on fire
finally to be able to see the melting
start to finish
in real time, just for once.

Here, Ross's long sentences spool through ragged lines that read like seismic printouts of mid-90s consumerist consciousness. In a rambling syntax reminiscent of conversation, Ross's speaker scrolls down topics of media-saturated thought. "[P]ost service-age economies," "Popeye cartoons," "the cathedral / on the hill," "military choppers," "the small / type scrolled by at the end of car commercials," "warnings by pharmaceutical companies," "the good Senator from _____," "ice cream cones": all are equivalent, finally, in the post-postmodern headrush of news-junk, empty calories and boredom. *The Fuzzy Logic Series* dissects the economic and social conditions underlying such cultural malaise with a razor-sharp wit and precision, serving the symptoms back to us like frenchfries on a platter of cynical hipness and "postlanguage" jump cuts. Yet while many of Ross's ironies are delicious, if they were all Ross offered they wouldn't in themselves be enough to mark this as a truly original work. Cutting ironies of this sort have been proffered for years, often by matters of pop-cultural manipulation like Laurie Anderson, David Lynch or Talking Heads. What is refreshing about Ross's series—what makes his poetic seem new and not just a rehash of pop avant-gardisms—is

that his social ironies are linked to an intellectual understanding of the conditions from which they arise; and further, that they are grounded in a lyrical address which lends the poems their disarming intimacy and candor. It is crucial that Ross's narrator is not outside the poems' social frame, but is a participant in the culture that he might ironically critique (the poem "PARATAXIS" has the narrator "[t]hrowing Frisbees in the park / with the homeless"), just as Ross, in his quirky way, participates in a lyrical convention which he might intellectually or politically critique.

It was then too that the scotch kicked in and you
came out to the porch just to rock awhile because
somewhere you still missed me and this world's preoccupations
had started to fall away or at least lose some of their insignificance
like standardized spelling that I wonder if Shakespeare
knew would eventually mean hegemonic control. But I
can't think of that now while what I'm supposed to be
doing is writing a love poem that my post-language
school friends wouldn't laugh at or find trite.
But I guess that's what art's about anyway—sampling
it all in and to see just who gets pissed enough
to start a revolution or at least still has the guts
enough to try to make some change for that
one global dollar feeding the machine that we've been
tricked into referring to as home. But not tonight or
today depending upon your current zone. It's the
human I'm after, and after all, it is the human that's
after you. So let's have a drink or something sure 'cause
you'll never know who'll be too old to be young enough
to remember this in the morning.

Here Ross calls attention to the problematics of the lyric even while actively engaging that genre as a mode of inquiry. The sudden presence of the beloved ("and you / came out to the porch") does not cue the making of similes upon her beauty as it might in Shakespeare, an amorous Byronic "scene" or confessions of rapture such as O'Hara could make. Instead, Ross wonders in the same sentence whether Shakespeare considered the politics of spelling standardization. Before the mixture of politics and the romantic moment starts to seem A.noldean ("and this world's preoccupations / had started to fall away"), Ross explains that what he is doing is actually writing a poem

about trying to write a love poem that one's "post-language / school friends wouldn't laugh at or find trite." From this point on, of course, the beloved completely disappears from the poem, as Ross's "jump cut" sentences move across seemingly random topics, ending in the internal slant rhyme of "home" and "zone" (lines 15-16 of the quoted passage). This formal twist provides some sublimated measure of lyrical comfort in its approximation of a rhymed couplet—but it also withholds that comfort due to the rhyme's internality and imperfection, as well as to the fact that it does not occur at the poem's close. The clever turn "It's the / human I'm after, and after all, it is the human that's / after you" sidesteps received notions of "the / human," as well as a predictable grasping for same within a lyrical context. Ross acknowledges the need for (less conventionalized) "humanness," while not reducing his poem to (simply) an emblem for that need, or an object toward its gratification.

The Fuzzy Logic Series challenges boundaries of genre lyricism and the growing, hybrid genre of "postlanguage" writing by reconfiguring a poetics of daily experience into the role of the intellectual in poetry. Throughout the book, Ross depolarizes opposites, mixing metaphors and metaphysical boundaries in a witty play of signifier with signified. This book is a welcome contribution to the body of writing that is moving out of the postlanguage impasse into a poetics of the (transcendent?) unknown. Or, as Ross's narrator says in a phrase that I'll let serve as this essay's close, "You should never try to say anything / without first taking off your clothes" (from "DIFFICULTIES").

A Charge for Song

SONNETS OF A PENNY-A-LINER BY MARK WALLACE
(BUCK DOWNS BOOKS, 1997)

Reviewed by Carol Mirakove

For the reader who dares to dream, who experiences self as being, who suppresses dreams for the sake of completing the tasks at hand, and who—consequently—grows confused and lacks direction, there is a home in Mark Wallace's sonnets.

We hear "sonnet" and think "14-line poem"; Wallace's poems remind us that "sonnet" comes from the Italian sonetto, "little song"—that is, they are little in size and possess the freeflow of songs. In ambition and intensity, however, Wallace's poems loom large with ferocity, despair, loss, and humor. Indeed, what is little is the individual life of the sonnets' speaker; paradoxically, what is large is that same self in its complexly and convincingly intimate states. These songs are sung in a place where the "I" confronts the double nature of self: the self is at once the dreamer/artist and the worker/official, the one who desires and the one whose time is under contract to an employer. A major question of the book is, then, how the self can live with its passions and with its tasks.

Wallace's sonnets ask this not only through the content of their words, but also through the speed with which the book reads; many of the sonnets employ rhyme schemes that piggy-back similar-sounding words—and resemble rap lyrics in this way—so that we are compelled to press on as the sonic forces demand. At the same time, we are pulled back into the poems to investigate the double meanings and double syntax at work. The question of how to read becomes, then, a matter of forward progression versus inward exploration, and then, what movement actually means. Do we read the poems as if the activity were a task ending in completion, or do we bask in the delicacies of song that permeate the book? By which approach might we most thoroughly understand the meaning of the poems? Clearly, both; nothing in this book is singular. The reader becomes enraptured with the speaker's dilemmas of doubles and the like:

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I want to love, and to be left alone,
 I want to do what I want, I want
 my time filled up with tasks, I want
 to have friends, can't stand
 to see anyone, I want the sky
 to drench me with light, the sun
 to be blotted out, I want to live live live
 I wish I was dead

Wallace's question of how to live with both dreams and tasks come out of a long tradition of distrust for the artist, the dreamer, and praise for the official. Complex ideas and artistic expressions are neither wanted nor welcome in a capitalistic society, and so the artist, the dreamer must become the official.

Accordingly, Wallace's sonnets do play to what is socially acceptable in song, sound, and diction. The close rhymes, quick rhythms, and simple vocabulary make for poems that are as catchy as pop. It is obvious that the speaker of these poems is very conscious of his craftiness and that he is producing a commodity—songs to be bought and sold. They can and do circulate quickly. They are also conformable to the reader's preference for short or long poems: the poems can be pulled out one-by-one as sound bytes at 14-lines each, or they can be read in sequence as an epic work of sorts. The poems seem untitled, allowing each poem to flow into the next and so on, so that it feels as if the book is one long poem. (Actually, each poem is titled, bearing a label of a monetary amount that is \$0.14 more than the poem preceding it; after 1,400 lines of poetry, we have \$14.00.) The constant visual reminder of the writer's earnings says that the dollar is the primary force by which the worker and the dreamer develop the self. Wallace capitalizes on this irony by seeking revenge on the ones who define the tasks that hold down the dreamer; he will guide the dreamer in steps towards achievement of power and money:

I will be king of the happy
 and jump up and down on my blood,
 I will sell lies and my body and the night
 and everyone will love me

This evokes images of Michael Crichton laughing en route to his fat bank account, which is success.

The dreamer and the worker are posited as double selves; the book is prefaced by four quotes, including one by Leonard J. Kent and Elizabeth C. Knight which starts: "Hoffman had therefore managed to begin living two lives, that of the official and that of the artist." But what is remarkable about Wallace's sonnets is the degree to which the two sides of self are intertwined. Further, it is not only the two sides which are inseparable, but also self and landscape (a theme that runs through Wallace's other work as well). Here is an entire sonnet in that vein:

\$7.42

The boat is racing towards rocks
 while I lay on the shore and watch
 laughing to see the wreck of my eyes,
 will there ever be time again
 to lie here and contemplate failure,
 refusing to win if this is the game
 of doing what needs to be done,
 selling, pushing and taking,
 crowning irrelevance of paper
 crushing inflections,
 tottering here for money on margins
 forming a business of poems,
 slide, sputter and speak,
 fight against silence, remain

By the third line of this poem, the speaker is the boat. Throughout the book it is the obsession of interrelation with the world that fuels Wallace's songs. We come to understand "double" as not only a division, but the existence of paradox, of multiple wills and roles. Even when the dreamer (the poet) wants to express desire in its most primitive or pure form, he says "I tried / to make noise but it came out talk," where talk is the form of expression created by the outside world, or the world of the worker (official).

Despite the lament of the dreamer's defeated desires in the work—the impossibility of producing noise—defeat of the whole self is refused in the sonnets. At \$6.30, Wallace writes "I'll never write another poem / which means it's time to start again." He knows the game, he hates the game, but what else is there to do but play? And after all, the sonnets are quite beautiful; they are even inspirational at points, such as this one:

America in your cities of power
 I blame my soul for shrinking,
 but I will be a caravan
 and not a desert, jewels will grow
 even from wasted pity
 and torn connections, in hills
 where mouths will cry for a roof

Complementing Wallace's poems are abstract prints by Lawley Paisley-Jones. The combination of visual art and poetry is something that ought to be done more often. In this book, the two are especially well paired, as both artists generate work that is not absolute in definition. Paisley-Jones's prints, like Wallace's poetry, elicit much attention to darkness, specifically in the way that the smear of the light and dark bleed into one another. Their white images are not separable from their black background, but rather white and black are interesting for the ways in which they form the other—just as Wallace's poems are interesting for the way the double sides of self form one another, and as the way poetry and visual art form one another. This is a rich, rewarding, and deeply personal text, for the reader who is prepared to explore what personal means.

Publications Received

Heather Fuller, *perhaps this is a rescue fantasy*. Edge Books, 1997, 72 pages, \$10.

Stephen-Paul Martin, *Not Quite Fiction*. Vatic Hum Press, 1997. 117 pages. \$8.95.

Lissa McLaughlin, *The Grouper*. Avec Books, 1997, 64 pages, \$8.50.
 A.L. Nielsen, *Stepping Razor*. Edge/Upper Limit, 1997, 62 pages, \$10.

Tod Thilleman, *The Corybantes*. Spuyten Duyvil, 1997. \$10.

Mark Wallace, *Nothing Happened and Besides I Wasn't There*. Edge Books, 1997, 48 pages, \$9.50.

Ribot #5 "History," edited by Paul Vangelisti, 144 pages. Available from Sun & Moon/Consortium Book Distribution.

Arshile: A Magazine of the Arts, edited by Mark Salerno, \$10. Arshile, P.O. Box 3749, Los Angeles, California 90078

House Organ #20, Fall 1997, edited by Kenneth Warren. 1250 Belle Avenue, Lakewood, OH 44107.

Avec Sampler, edited by Cydney Chadwick, Avec Books, 1997.

Nedge 5, edited by Henry Gould and Janet Sullivan. The Poetry Mission, P.O. Box 2321, Providence, RI, 02906.