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FALL/WINTER 1998

**Mark Wallace on
The Pragmatic Spirit of Collaboration**

"In the broadest sense, one collaborates not simply with one's friends, or with the disciplinary mechanics of the society at large—one also collaborates with those other writers and artists with whom one does not agree, or agrees partially, tentatively. Collaboration also involves disagreement, contention, strife and upset..."

Henry Gould on the Stanza

**Brian Kim Stefans on
Close Listening**

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Poems for the Millennium**

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The Pragmatic Spirit of Collaboration: The Work of Elizabeth Burns and Jefferson Hansen

By Mark Wallace

*a thing for love
we found
was institutional*

—Jefferson Hansen

With your voice at my voice we turn into and into the dark
—Elizabeth Burns

ON THE WEEKEND of October 19, 1991, as part of a much larger weekend party on the island of Nantucket, a number of young poets associated with the Poetics Program at the University of Buffalo gathered for the wedding of two of their friends at a time when a number of significant writing projects were beginning to be formed. These projects would take shape over the next several years, and would explore both the nature of what a new poetics criticism might be, as well as delving into the possibilities of an end of the century innovative poetry fraught with new dangers; dangers in the limitations of the notion of formal innovation as progress, in an institutional environment that seemed increasingly to dominate even rebellions against it, in a generation in which new economic pressures and the destruction of many magazines and publishing concerns devoted to innovative poetry put such

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writers further and further away from any potential readership. Published articulations of ways to resist and overcome these problems lay in the days ahead; what was present on this particular weekend was the sense that a new generation of poets was beginning to recognize itself in shared questions.

Searches for origins are always vexed, politically and otherwise; no decisions about poetry were made that weekend, nothing definitively began. But what was present on the weekend when Elizabeth Burns and Jefferson Hansen married was a feeling of celebration that new possibilities of writing and living were being born, despite all the pressures that suggested such possibilities were unreasonable, even pointless.

But wait; a marriage? What does that have to do with innovation, with literature? Why bring up such a personal event? Isn't marriage the opposite of innovation, a succumbing to the legal traditions of a society that doesn't even acknowledge that innovation existed outside of the "innovations" of new capitalist products, the "innovations" that are turning all but an elite few into underpaid, overworked temporaries—labor to be bought up, seized, with insufficient compensation. Marriage as the buying and selling of women, the codifying of male energy inside an economy of ownership and responsibility opposed to creative imagination. What might a marriage contribute to the dynamic of innovation?

If it might contribute anything at all, it would be in the idea that true innovation can be achieved only in a process that explores responsiveness to others. Beyond the constraints of legal mechanics, a marriage, indeed any involvement with others, must to have positive effects be collaborative, an activity engaging the concerns of others recognized in their necessary differences. Not marriage as predetermined social fact, but as a collaboration of energies created in process, without restriction to predefined use. "What was marriage/before us," Hansen writes in the poem he read at the wedding, as if a culture did not exist before what people might make of it. As if his own life might be a process of becoming.

Naivete cannot help; if anything marks the best efforts of literature at the end of this all too human century, it is a commitment, on all levels, to avoid naivete about artistic and literary acts. We must, now, recognize such acts not as the field marked by the work of isolated geniuses

free of social complicity, but as an inevitably social field rife with contradiction, marked not by its separateness from other social activities but by its interrelation with such activities; the need for money, for time, the struggle to act with any degree of purpose in a world owned by capitalism and its spectacles—a world where any act, even artistic ones, can be instantly co-opted by the mechanics of profit. Avant garde poetry is "as worldly as chia pets, lawn mowers, bridge games, and Newt Gingrich," Hansen writes in *Central Park* 26 (167). This sense of writing as inevitably social does not deny that a writer can be as idiosyncratic and particular as possible, does not even deny that genius exists. But it posits creativity as emerging not from predetermined "individual" capabilities, as if God had simply decided that some people were born to be great writers and others to worship and misunderstand their greatness. Rather, creativity becomes the act of human imagination in engagement with others. In such an articulation, "genius" then becomes the ability to be responsive to others at the most particular and profound levels, in one's writing or any other way.

Naivete cannot help. The danger in positing a notion of engagement with others as the source of creativity might be to idealize collaboration, to make the worst mistakes of utopian dreams and suggest that a world of collaboration is a world where everyone gets along.

In an early dialogue with Hansen, I quoted William Burroughs from his novel *Nova Express*: "To live is to collaborate" (189), in the context of a collaborative piece suggesting the importance of collaboration. Yet the irony of my use of Burroughs is the double meaning of collaborate, which itself depends on the problem of who one is collaborating with, as the rest of the Burroughs' passage makes clear:

I would like to sound a word of warning—To speak is to lie—To live is to collaborate—Anybody is a coward when faced by the nova ovens—There are degrees of lying collaboration and cowardice— (189)

Collaboration, in Burroughs' passage, is inevitable social complicity with the forces of darkness in a world defined by terror. One can see how much this notion of collaboration jars against a notion of collaboration as creative responsiveness to others. Is collaboration an act of succumbing to the society of the spectacle, of putting one's own creative energies at the service of capitalist institutions? Or is it the act of exploring one's creative potential in whatever ways it might find itself,

beyond even resistance to institutions, in the place where it creates its own becoming?

What the work of both Elizabeth Burns and Jefferson Hansen has suggested, from the first, is that the notion of collaboration must resist any claims to purity, if one means by purity a position unsullied by social complicity. Here is Burns in *Poetic Briefs* #1, writing about Nicole Brossard:

Brossard urges readers and writers to investigate the limits of the margins in which we are confined/condemned/allowed to write—as poets, as women, as lesbians, as Canadians or Americans, nationalists or ex-patriots. Brossard reminds us to ask of ourselves and of the materials we read, Who is censoring? Who is silencing? what self-censorship do we impose, and what mutating devices are applied by the state, the climate, the family?

Burns asks us to see, as Judith Butler and others have also done, the politics of identity (“as poets, as women,” etc.) not as a claim to autonomy and power but as “margins in which we are confined/condemned/allowed to write,” marginal positions created as margins, which are by their very constitution limits to the possibilities of language and social refiguration, limits that must be investigated and critiqued. Yet Burns does not suggest that these limits are imposed solely from without—they are not the workings of power upon unthinking victims. Rather, the question of who is censoring, who is silencing, must be raised repeatedly, so that the answer does not become ourselves: “what self-censorship do we impose?” The ability to censor one’s own creative capacities means that the problem of censorship, of limiting one’s own capacity for being and creating, must also be recognized as inherent to collaboration.

Collaboration then becomes not a simple act of freely creating one’s relation to others, but an act of creation that is simultaneous with the possibility of destruction. Creation is not simply opposed to destruction, but in tension with it—creation and destruction as intimately bound parts of becoming. To create oneself is always to risk censoring oneself, is perhaps always partly to be censoring. If the problem of censorship is inherent to creation, then the question becomes not how to create oneself freely, but how to create oneself anyway, in a world where the possibility of uncensored becoming may be a fantasy.

When does a marriage become a mirage? If you’re not always asking it, it’s already true.

The years after 1991 would see many new magazines and book projects coming from the University of Buffalo Poetics Program: *Poetic Briefs*, *Leave Books*, *The Lab Book*, *Situation*, *Apex of the M*, Meow Press, *Chain*. The publications were produced by various editors at various times, with greater or lesser levels of collaboration, communication, and antagonism. Many of the writers who appeared in these publications would begin, over the next several years, to have their own books published.

Even inside the limited framework of the program, speaking of a community of collaboration, as if the editors of these publications and the writers in them formed some kind of happy family, would be sentimental and a cliché, as well as simply not true. As Hansen notes in “Anarchism and Culture,” “There is no such thing as the arts community. Art is factious” (8).

Furthermore, there is a danger in each new generation of writers that unnecessary, perhaps even ridiculous, lines will be drawn about whose work constitutes significant practice. It would be a common and boring mistake to take one’s friends as the measure of significant practice, to relegate those with whom one is not directly associated to positions of less significance. While it remains important for writers to put forward the work of other writers they admire, one must be immediately skeptical of claims that this or that network of writers is the only source of truly innovative poetry in its time. This skepticism seems especially necessary now, when there may be more writers in the world exploring innovation than ever before.

In the broadest sense, one collaborates not simply with one’s friends, or with the disciplinary mechanics of the society at large—one also collaborates with those other writers and artists with whom one does not agree, or agrees partially, tentatively. Collaboration also involves disagreement, contention, strife and upset.

I want to say that while I can see many similarities between the work of Elizabeth Burns and Jefferson Hansen, the key distinction is this: Burns’ work remains committed to the idea that identity, as a process of writing and living, might become a fluid process, an intense becoming.

ing responsive at all times. Hansen's work, on the other hand, remains more obsessed with what it cannot become, and so commits itself to an exploration of the limits that impose themselves on any possibility of absolute fluidity. Burns: how identity can be refigured. Hansen: explorations of the historical, cultural, and political limitations that prevent identity from being refigured.

In any total sense, such a distinction would be false. It is easy to find passages in each of their work that would make the opposite case: Burns is obsessed with limitations, Hansen posits a world of energetic free play. Yet I want to make the distinction perhaps because of my sense of the way Hansen highlights pragmatics (I mean pragmatics here as the choices that make one who one is, but choices as they are a response to the powerfully constituted field of pre-existing social determinations) whereas Burns highlights belief in the possible, is more committed to the idea that the human capacity for belief repeatedly recreates in us a drive to reconfigure identity.

More important, however, than making this distinction, is to suggest that the interplay between limitations and possibilities in their work as editors and writers ultimately makes this distinction collapse in upon itself, because there are no possibilities without pragmatics, and no pragmatics without possibilities.

Or I could say Hansen is a man, Burns is a woman, Hansen grew up middle class Wisconsin Scandinavian Lutheran, Burns upper middle class Boston Irish Catholic, Hansen comes from a social world that assumes literature does not matter or even exist, Burns from a world in which successful literary figures often were collaborators in the worst sense. Yet these things are true only as the margins from which possibility begins, the limitations from which it takes off.

I could say: critical definitions of their work are the point at which reconfiguring begins again.

If there is one thing that to my mind most defines *Poetic Briefs*, the poetics newsletter that Burns and Hansen began in the winter of 1991 and which continues to this day, it would be the concept of the critical dialogue. In the critical dialogue, rather than a single author expressing his or her own viewpoint (with the often implicit assumption that writing therefore arises from the isolated independent author) criticism becomes a collaboration, a discussion between authors. The criti-

cal dialogue becomes what it does in the interplay between critical perspectives. The critical text is no longer the work of the singular authority proving a series of conclusions; rather, the critical text is a series of interchanges in which the totality of the piece escapes individual control, instead emerging in the agreements, disagreements, gaps and connections of the text. The critical dialogue is more than the sum of the positions of its writers; it becomes defined also by the shifting ground between those positions.

In PB #8, in and around many issues of the newsletter which featured dialogues between other writers, Hansen and Burns themselves dialogued, on the subject of the relation between a poetics of materiality and a poetics of spirituality. Hansen projects skepticism about any conventional notion of spirituality:

I find myself suspicious of a poetry that directly confronts the spirit. Too often, such poetry falls into the poet-as-seer/poem as precious medium narrative. Rather, spirituality could be the by-product of close attention to the materials before us. (15)

He opens the above passage noting that "Whitman has the soul say to the body 'we are one'" (15). That is, while not rejecting outright the possibility of a "spiritual" perspective, for Hansen such a perspective can only legitimately emerge from engagement with the body, with the material and social world. He rejects spirituality as transcendence, suggests that it will be found, if at all, through engagement.

Burns responds by agreeing, but also by suggesting that her sense of an engaged materiality always involves "a pact between the poet and the material" that "my body knows is true" (15). Such a response might seem essentialism, but it isn't, although Burns is keenly aware that it looks that way: "this may sound insanely purist or even precious" (15). Rather, if the mind-body split were really broken down, as Burns suggests it already is for her, then our experiences of the material engagement that Hansen wants will also occur on the level of the body, would "have to correspond with what my marrow knows" (15). This knowing on the level of the body gives intelligence to the body, just as it gives physicality to the mind. Burns does not simply posit that the mind and body are interrelated—she literally experiences their interrelation in response to the material presence of the poem.

Thus, again: the change created by the poem is not pure and disem-

bodied, but the act of engaging with materials, just as one learns to want to write by reading what others have written. Just as collaborating with others who are becoming writers is one way to become a writer oneself. Just as in our concern with others, we come to see who we might be.

Here's the mistake: to assume that possibility is unlimited.

Here's the mistake: to assume that one knows what possibility is limited to.

Burns' *Letters to Elizabeth Bishop* begins with a painful sense of limitations, not simply as imposed by others but as imposed by oneself: "The urge to censor all of this is enormous" (5). Yet Burns realizes this censorship must be resisted, in the name of achieving new possibilities: "That, of course, would make the project invalid. I am doing this to learn, without questioning what I am doing at that moment, and trying to explore the possibilities of my reading experience" (5).

In *Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, Burns' attempt to write is intimately caught up with issues of gender, sexuality, and identity:

The part that I most want to censor, of course, is any part relevant to or suggestive of sex. This desire to censor, meanwhile, goes against my basic instincts: to separate sexuality from every day life is to encourage perversion, abuse, pathology. (5)

The text explores Burns' sense that her own sexual experiences are being de-legitimized by the limits to identity imposed by such terms as lesbianism and heterosexuality:

I guess that now that I am with a man I feel I no longer have a right to this issue. This infuriates me. I was roundly chastised by my ex the other night and all her friends laughed at me for getting married. (5)

Just being here, so many years later, I feel like my lover P and I could barely even talk to others about ourselves. Where I had been able to talk about everything concerning boys and husbands and sex with my sisters, I could not mention P at all. And with lesbian friends, it was just that I was supposed to be able to have them as friends. But I didn't have any good lesbian friends in this small community. Who had been my friends were also ex-lovers, and that was how our friendships had begun. Now my ex-lovers seem to hate each other. (8)

In these passages one can see how the insistence on singular sexual identities makes creative engagement—even basic conversation—impossible. The heterosexual norms of her family isolate Burns in her lesbian relationship with P. But for Burns, the problems inside the norms of the lesbian community where she lives are similar: there is an assumption of personal and political sameness because of supposedly inviolable sexual identities. For Burns, the lesbian community where she lives simply repeats on a smaller scale the problems of heterosexual hegemony—one must conform to proper modes of behavior. If the lesbian community has the advantage of celebrating and defending lesbian difference from heterosexual norms, it has the disadvantage of assuming that people are automatically friends because of their difference from those norms (no one, for instance, assumes heterosexuals should be friends simply because they're heterosexual). Yet despite the real needs for political solidarity by lesbians because of their threatened status, for Burns that omnipresent threat is not necessarily sufficient grounds for friendship. Because it defines sexual identity as singular in a similar, though opposing, way as heterosexuality, lesbianism has become, for Burns, simply too much the binary opposition of heterosexuality, with mutually exclusive norms of behavior—you must be one or the other, and you must behave correctly.

Throughout *Letters*, therefore, Burns seeks a space that will allow for a more fluid sense of sexuality, one beyond any singular identity; sexuality as a collaboration of becoming under whatever circumstances one chooses to become it. In so doing, she rejects any essentialist difference between men and women:

But all this feels so tiresome now. Maybe I'm just rebounding from all the stuff that happened with P last week, and my... I forget what I was thinking. Oh, probably something about how the idea of women having secret codes and special places and different agendas and different ways of seeing feels absolutely useless suddenly. It seems like this: men are crazy and deluded, women are crazy and deluded, poetry is already written, we're all looking for guidance/advice. (23)

At the same time that she rejects such essentialism, Burns feels very distinctly, in terms of gender training, the differences between the men and women she knows. In particular, she notes the way her male friends seem to be able to frame their intellectuality inside a profes-

sional discourse that doesn't seem to harm them personally, a frame that reenacts the mind-body split by isolating intellectual life from the life of the emotions and the body:

And I notice something markedly different about my male friends: they have disagreements with each other and with me, and then close the argument, as if it were only a discussion. Anything that makes me angry, anything I argue about, is never only a discussion for me. I feel like it is always a part of me, it is always something that is in my skin. (27)

Throughout *Letters*, Elizabeth Bishop, no longer living poet, becomes for Burns a secret collaborator, someone whom she can think about, write to, compare ideas and experience. While there is great respect, even reverence, for Bishop's achievement, there is also a determined though still loyal questioning of Bishop's own motives for refusing to appear in anthologies of women writers, and for "Not 'taking a stand' about someone else's brand of feminism" (9). Although she remains uncomfortable with Bishop's conclusions about these matters, Burns finally argues that Bishop was at least partly attempting to reject the limitations of identity politics, because of a sense that any essentialist notion of "women" doomed her to second class citizenship.

Is writing to Bishop a way for Burns to find the fluidity of identity she seeks? The question remains a question, because she does not achieve that fluidity. But if Burns does not find the possibility beyond the binary, she does not lose her belief that such a possibility remains. *Letters to Elizabeth Bishop* becomes a way of reminding herself that she does believe in that possibility:

I don't want to despair. I want grace for articulation. Maybe that's it. Through grace to articulate anger, therefore diffusing the overwhelming specter of despair. That's what I hope for, in my work with you, in my relationships with my friends and fiancé and family, in my career... to have that grace that articulates beyond the silence of despair... to not give up but to give over to increasing possibilities of articulation. (27)

At the end of *Letters*, Burns reminds herself that despair is not everything. Despite, perhaps, all that her experience has taught her, she cannot give up her belief that another way of being is possible. In reminding herself that she must continue "to give over to increasing possibilities of articulation," Burns rediscovers the strength to continue.

Hansen is the author of five chapbooks, including the October 1993 issue of *Abacus*. Each book explores the relation between his own intense energy (poetic, intellectual and physical) and the increasing stridency of the social limitations with which that energy finds itself confronted. Although they deviate widely from book to book, two main formal devices form the basis for much of Hansen's poetry—the block prose poem à la Ron Silliman's "new sentence" (although less paratactical than in Silliman's formulation) and filled with precise cultural observation, and more free-flowing jazz-inflected open form poetic sequences that energetically expand across the page while at the same time not sacrificing cultural insight. By no means are these two devices mutually exclusive. In his first chapbook, *Gods to the Elbows*, even the block prose pieces are free-flowing. By the time of *The Dramatic Monologues of Joe Blow Only Artsy* and *Why I Am Not A Christian*, as well as "This Afternoon's Business" and "Late on a Friday Night" from the *Abacus* collection *Three Poems*, even those sections broken into poetic lines have the abrasive, offbeat abruptness that was earlier reserved only for the more "social commentary" oriented block sections. This change does mark a definite alteration in Hansen's work to this point. The focus in his recent work has become more and more specifically a critique of historical and cultural limitation, a pragmatic response to those limitations rather than the expansive energy of the earlier work.

Even in his earliest work, the greater sense of energetic freedom that the books portray does not present naivete about the limitations of the social, as the following two sections from the first page of "Red Streams Of George Through Pages" makes clear:

mine derived of
from to (them)
dance steps
pull singular into whirl
seemly shipwreck
of lost
mining

frenzy bounded:
neighborhood riot
televised

bloody forehead
handcuffs a body
police cordon streets

These two sections hover on the margins of the main flow of text down the page. The first, recalling George Oppen's line "the shipwreck of the singular," shows Hansen displaying how even the energetic "dance steps" of the book, which are "mine," are nonetheless "derived of/ from to (them)." That is, his "dance steps" come from a complex relation to others, pulling him away from the singular, into a whirl where many have been shipwrecked, and where any perhaps comforting notion of himself as individual ("mine") becomes, through a pun, the social act of "mining," with all its attendant implications of wealth, power, exploitation, and environmental harm. The second section makes that social investment and limitation even more apparent—the "frenzy" (of Hansen's text, his energy, of the larger social environment) is "bounded" by media control and political terror.

As he moves forward from the manic energy of *Gods To The Elbows* and *Red Streams of George Through Pages*, Hansen's concern with the dailiness of these social limitations grows, a concern made blatantly apparent in the opening of "This Afternoon's Business":

Memos, discussion of cheese and arcane meanings turn to this: another period of normalcy in a slightly altered context. You promised difficulties, an imposition, possible internment. A gift is wonderful and presents limitations: what-to-do-with-its-horizon, a focus for now, perhaps a lifetime. We may call it our career. It may be all I am (or care to be). (8)

By this point, Hansen's sense of the power of the human imagination to reconfigure experience has been pared down to its ability to create "Another period of normalcy in a slightly altered context"—one that contains not simply difficulties and impositions, but the always omnipresent possibility of being jailed. The "gift... presents limitations," and if Hansen remains uncomfortable with the idea that his attempts to reconfigure experience may, at best, create for him "a career"—hardly social reconfiguration on a profound level—he nonetheless has few illusions about his powers, his identity, or even, disastrously, his desires: "It may be all I am (or care to be)."

"This Afternoon's Business" offers no adequate solutions to the problems it suggests. Hansen's query near the end of the poem, "Could the

essence of principle reside in compromise?" is swamped by the irony all around it, if it weren't already ironic in the first place (14). And the poem "Late on a Friday Night," which follows "This Afternoon's Business," contains an absolute frenzy of such ironic limitations:

Gang 75 pig
iron handlers per pace work composite
unity operative factors used substitute
phantasy, wisest best prerogative princes god-
like gross and subtle meaninglessness. (17)

"Late on a Friday Night" is perhaps the most intense realization of the purposefully conflicting dimensions of Hansen's work, combining perhaps the greatest energy of line with the most obsessive sense of failure and limitation.

Hansen's fullest explorations to this point of the social limitations of daily life can be found in *The Dramatic Monologues of Joe Blow Only Artsy*. The *Monologues* use a single, socially displaced male character as a focal point for a series of desperately ironic reflections on the slippery slope of contemporary social relations. Reading the book is like trying to stand on solid ice; the ground just isn't there, and any way you try to move, you find yourself sliding.

Joe Blow is an every middle American white man distinguished only by his pretensions to a cultural awareness and superiority he doesn't believe in for a moment: "I know Brahms, I know/Hegel. I wear round, wire-glasses" (10). In fact, Joe can't help thinking that everything he knows is wrong. Of course, everything everybody else knows is wrong too. But Joe finds it hard to take comfort in the fact that at least he knows he doesn't know what he's talking about.

Joe's constant, creeping doubts do not take place in a vacuum. He's got work to do, a family to take care of, a whole series of social engagements and arrangements that take up all his time and don't pay him well. He's got to deal with bosses, with the television, with political parties and the co-opting of any real possibility of social change, with the confusing depths of his own insecurities. He wants to help, but it hardly seems like anybody is doing things he should help them with—"We/could be more than a scaffolding/for a few specific/activities such as flaunting/facts about nose cartilage" (10).

The *Monologues* are very funny, if only because the grimness of Joe

Blow's social milieu is so painfully comic. There are occasional lights at the end of the tunnel, although they're always likely to be a train headed in Joe's direction. But Joe hasn't given in to despair. If anything, each ironic limit makes him more determined to see past it, to develop some kind of pragmatic response that will allow him to put one foot in front of the other. Grand statements of truth are not a possibility in Joe's world, but methods of proceeding may be—if only he can find which ones: "Something will lift are/we so/passive. He said it is attitude" (14).

By the end of the *Monologues*, Joe Blow seems to have discovered, at best, a temporary, partial resolution to his concerns about the relation between social limitations and the need to radically reconfigure identity and experience. The limitations have come to seem dominant; reconfiguration is a matter of precise adjustments of behavior in already overcontextualized realms, adjustments that may be doomed in advance. Yet it would be a mistake to collapse distinctions between Joe Blow and Hansen; Joe Blow is a comic, confused figure, for the most part trapped in his own circular reflections. Hansen on the other hand has showed, through his poetry and criticism, how to live and write pragmatically in response to the context to which Joe Blow, for the most part, succumbs. While Hansen by no means offers simple solutions to the problems developed in *Three Poems* and the *Monologues*, each of the works reveals an intelligence persuasively able to pick apart the ideological limitations of the world where it must live.

If the work of both Burns and Hansen repeatedly twists the subject of how far social identity can be refigured, and how serious limits to that refiguring may be, and if one ultimately cannot make any simple distinction about the optimism with which each writer faces these questions, nonetheless one must return to the different vantage point from which each writer seems to approach their concerns.

For Burns, however prone to despair her work often shows her becoming, the vantage point seems finally that of the spiritual. "Spiritual" for her, however, does not imply transcendence. Rather, it implies the sense which runs through her work that life, in its materiality, its complexity, its confusion, must still be regarded essentially as holy.

This holiness does not come from any belief in God. Burns' essay "Talking About Bishop's God and Talking About That" explicitly re-

jects Bishop's transcendent sense of universal oneness. Burns quotes two lines, one from a poem important to Bishop and one from Bishop's own work: "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'," as well as "...flowing and flown" from Bishop's poem "The Fishhouses" (*A Poetics of Criticism* 197). Yet in a column of writing running parallel to the one in which these quotes appear, Burns' own comments make clear her rejection of this unity: "nothing connected, everything disparate, crumbs of essentials, and everything certainly flowing and flown but hardly anything feeling like 'everything'" (197).

Rather than any belief in universal spiritual oneness, Burns' sense of the spiritual comes from the repeated return to belief itself, and to the belief, ultimately, that a creative existence is possible. In such a framework, materiality itself is holy; what's holy also is the human possibility for belief in that materiality, especially as that materiality is embodied in the materiality of language:

Like you believe in words. Or you wouldn't be here now. You believe something will come through to you. You believe in an immanence, perhaps more than you believe in a transcendence. Even if you believed in Emerson's transcendence you got there by meeting Emerson at his rhododendron bush. You believed his words before you believed his bush. And if you believed in Moses you believed the words before you believed the tablets. And if you believed in Dickinson you believed her robins and her Eternities in words before you believed her Trees outside her window from the picture she could give you. (198)

This belief in the possibilities of words becomes, for Burns, a deep conviction that the relation between things matters. She finds herself unable to resist believing that collaboration is possible in such a way that an artist, a person in all multiplicity and fragmentation, can create her own life:

That words would insist on immanence again and again and again. That words would hold us in relation, and it's up to you who is the authority, more than you know it. (200)

For Burns, the presence of this unavoidable immanence—that words insist on being real, in a way that permits a process of becoming, and becoming again—serves as a focal point which returns her to belief, despite her tendency to despair. Her sense of the spiritual is that we are returned, repeatedly and despite both ourselves and the world that

we live in, to belief in the possibility of becoming.

For Hansen, however, spirituality doesn't seem real; while at times he seems to suggest that holiness may exist, he never seems really to believe it. Even if such holiness were real, he seems to say, that would give him no more certainty about how to behave, how to navigate day to day reality. His vantage point remains pragmatic, skeptical of belief and the disasters that it has caused. Burns' sense of immanence, in constant tension with her own urge towards doubt and despair, allows her to keep believing that material recreation is possible; Hansen's pragmatism leads him constantly to displace questions of belief in the name of a practical examination of what can be done at the moment.

One of the key passages in his work, section 2 of *Why I Am Not A Christian*, finds Hansen struggling with how to keep the power of belief from distracting him from the pragmatic concerns of the moment. The book has as one of its opening quotes George Oppen's passionate rejection of belief and its myths: "and the myths/Have been murderous,/Most murderous, stake/And faggot. Where can it end." In Section 2, Hansen returns to this problem:

To expel sin is Christian and here I reverse the terms: Christianity is sin and must be expelled. Its forms poison perception. Yet, I have reiterated the terms of that which I wish to abandon. The mythos of this religion appears at the back door when kicked out the front. (2)

For Hansen, Oppen's passionate rejection of religious myth contains the danger of simply becoming a reversal of terms, without a deeper questioning of the process of belief. There is the danger that both Oppen and Hansen will set up their opposition to myth and belief as a new religion of its own. The answer, for Hansen, is to seek a third term that is neither the belief in belief, or the rejection of belief:

Writing in the wake of Christianity, I cannot yet escape this 'common worship,' nor should I try to. Can I reorient old forms, a more radical move than asserting new forms that in fact only replicate? (Section 2)

Pragmatism thus requires not violent rejection of Christianity and other forms of belief, but rather the critiquing, undermining, and re-orientation of old forms of belief in such a way that one does not

simply set new beliefs in their place.

This difference in vantage point for Burns and Hansen becomes, ultimately, one of the major sources of their collaboration. It is not in any sense a disagreement; it is more exactly a difference. Collaboration does not emerge in any simple agreement with others, or in our sameness to them. Rather, collaboration is the process of discovering what can be created between us, a creation that reveals both similarities and differences.

Finally, Burns' belief in the possibility of belief, and Hansen's careful pragmatic steps, sooner or later enable for both of them a process of radical questioning about how, beyond identity politics, beyond the traditions and history of poetry, beyond the discourse of anti-materialist transcendence, collaboration can help create a space for living not determined by singular definition, or by a desire to reject old controls in order to replace them with new ones. But one should not say "beyond"—for it is the human condition, in the work of both of them, to be constantly inside and involved. Perhaps it would be better to say "beside" or "with"—words that reveal a relation to something else, without being consumed by it.

I like to think of them this way. Burns is on stage, giving a dramatic performance of her early poem "Joan of Arc." Joan confronts her own beliefs, her doubts, her pain, as she burns, knowing she is dying, not thinking what dying means, but experiencing what it is. Burns' performance is compelling, intense, dangerous, it's she herself burning, she really is burning, one can feel it; here is a woman who has always been burning.

I like to think of Hansen in the audience watching, uncomfortable—for when has he ever been comfortable? He's too big for the theater chair, and shifts around. Watching her, he is enthralled, he loves her, knows she is just acting, knows she is not acting, that she is burning. But he knows too that she will get off the stage—what happens then? Dinner, a drink? A poem? He thinks to himself: after someone burns, what next?

And then I think that I can't imagine one of them without the other. Where would she be if he wasn't there to know she was burning? Where would he be if she wasn't there to remind him that life was possible? Somewhere else, of course. But it would be a place that I

can't imagine either of them able to bear. And I think yes, that's collaboration at its finest—a way to remind each other that the world is possible to bear. A way to help each other bear it.

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Sounds Are Things

CLOSE LISTENING, EDITED BY CHARLES BERNSTEIN
(OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1998)

Reviewed by Brian Kim Stefans

CLOSE LISTENING TAKES the word "close" from its title far more literally than the word "listening," stretching the definition of the latter to range from the synaesthetic pleasure of grapheme-centered poetics to the attending to poetry read aloud without the comfortable closure of discursive comprehension, and from the hearing and reacting from *within* a group improvisation (and consequent brushes with near-utopic levels of supra-linguistic communication) to the micro-political illuminations and porous language spheres that a post-serial barrage of torqued, collaged texts creates, and on to the more mundane issue of the poetry reading introduction on the tonal space of the reading itself. In this manner, "close listening," quite unlike "close reading," that often academic pursuit-of-depth through the cultural, personal and formal aspects of a group of words framed on a page and called a "poem," has shifting borders and, in the way that a walkman liberated recorded music from the domestic sphere of the hi-fi and brought it to subways and tricycles, "close listening" forces the listening to poetic texts outside of the cultural norm of the "reading," where it is ephemeral, into the age of mechanical reproduction. But "listening" occurs, too, where one always expects it to be found: in moments of community reaffirmation when assembling around a political event or cause, but also during one's upbringing, whether in Harlem or Ireland, when the ear (and through the head and out the mouth) is first finding its cultural tunings. In fact, each of the eighteen

Brian Kim Stefans's first book of poetry, *Free Space Comix*, was published this year by Roof Books. A new volume, *Gulf*, is forthcoming from Poetscope/Object Editions.

essays of *Close Listening* approach from such different angles that the only "listening" one can do to derive their common themes is to the buzz of missed conversations that occur in the interstitial spaces between their chapter headings. There isn't a single line towed here except that, perhaps, of the agreement that the singular characteristics of this moment in poetic history are being shaped by technological advances in recording technologies, along with the intellectual innovations and trends that depend on them. New canons, and new dictionaries, however rhizomic in nature, may soon be at hand.

Charles Bernstein, the editor of the volume, argues in his introduction for a "post-Euclidean (or complex) prosody for the many poems for which a traditional prosody does not apply." Likewise, a discussion of this volume would require a non-Euclidean frame, one that permits the various writers to wander free among their assumed vectors. Johanna Drucker, in the relatively straight-forward survey "Visual Performance of the Poetic Text," concentrates on the development of concrete and sound poetry in the primarily European avant-garde, providing valuable information on such little-known figures such as the Russian poet Ilia Zdanevich, who along with Khlebnikov and Krutchenyk explored *zaum* poetics and the "emotional and essential value of sound," but who himself went on to edit important volumes of concrete poetry. Her essay takes in everyone from Mallarmé to Wyndham Lewis, from Tzara to Henri Chopin, and also includes an important consideration of the French Lettrist movement, a vital mirror movement to that of the Concrete poets but which never quite reached their breakthroughs in visual semiotics. Marjorie Perloff's "After Free Verse: The New Nonlinear Poetics," a consideration centered around readings of Robert Creeley, Susan Howe, and many poets of the *Out of Everywhere* anthology of women's writing (edited by the English poet Maggie O'Sullivan), is similarly conventional in its exegetical manner, though it utilizes its stable platform (the technique derives, indeed, from a version of the conventional "close reading") to reach a pitch of manifesto-like futurity in its final paragraphs. Arguing initially that a poem such as Creeley's "Anger" finds its meter in the "word as such" and not in the "line," and moving through such page-based works as Howe's *The Liberties*, Perloff dismisses the concept of "free verse" as being outdated, eventually creating generalizations that extend even beyond the reach of her wide-ranging essay:

We have a poetics of nonlinearity or postlinearity that marks, not a return to the "old forms," because there is never a complete return, no matter how strongly one period style looks back to another, but a kind of "after-image" of earlier soundings, whether Anglo-Saxon keenings, formally balanced eighteenth-century prose, or Wittgensteinian aphoristic fragment. The new poems are, in most cases, as visual as they are verbal; they must be seen as well as heard, which means that at poetry readings, their scores must be performed, activated. Poetry, in this scheme of things, becomes what McCaffery has called "an experience in language rather than a representation by it."

This distinction helps the contemporary reader of poetry to determine the difference between a conservative Poundian dictum to "make it new" and the variety of young poets today who are using historical materials – both the meters or content of past poetries (the "new lyric," the "radical pastoral," the Duncan-esque literary pastiche or, indeed, documentary in the Howe mode) – in their counter-canonizing work. Is there a difference? Other essays, such as Peter Middleton's "The Contemporary Poetry Reading" and Dennis Tedlock's "Towards a Poetics of Polyphony and Translatability," an interesting consideration of Mayan poetics utilizing both transliteration and original iconography, also proceed along "linear" discursive grounds, though the latter strays most (along with Howe's essay, "Ether Either," discussed below) from the common Western methods of experiencing "poetry" – the reading and the book.

On opposite end of these conventionally structured texts are a group that activates the language at hand to create very divergent forums for discourse on their topics. Most notable is Bruce Andrews's "Praxis: A Political Economy of Noise and Informalism," whose themes escape the closed sphere of supra-linguistic thought and enter – via ellipses, injunction, and performative em-dashes – into the idiom of its telling. By starting his essay with a consideration of Adorno's writings on music, specifically political readings of melodic-versus-serial/constructivist tendencies, Andrews sets the stage for a discussion of language's "noise" elements, which create a way for poetry to achieve *sound-ness* but without creating a centralized, and hence cut-off (monadic), meaning. "By means of Noise: to disrupt the flow of communication, to create extreme libidinized density, to approach 'white noise' – mixing so many audible frequencies together that no perceivable definite pitch is observed." Such an operation counters what is probably most understood to be the aims of "performance poetry,"

which is “charismatic absorptions of the audience into its fixed shapes and closures.” However, noise and “informalism” achieve more than simply the negativizing process of critiquing community, identity, or the demagogue; it exposes interrelation:

The key is to stop treating sound as if it were a natural phenomenon, to let the social interrupt all ubiquitous immediacy (of emptier – or full because formalized – sounds). After all, any mechanically total aesthetic organization will be contaminated by social significance, some of which adheres to the differentials of sound and gives them a decodable outward vocation – (something akin to presence). The subsumptions of structure will be a dilution, counteracting the social vectors of individual language cells. Informalist construction, instead, offers a recognition of the opportunities for emancipating the dissonance of social tone. It makes it impossible for the whole to be merely the sum of its parts, for it acknowledges that the parts occupy an additional plane of intersecting waywardness.

Steve McCaffery, in “Voice in Extremis,” adopts a similarly liberated Cageian poetics for an investigation into utopic (or counter-capitalist) modes of poetry, mapping out in a highly theoretic yet historically documented fashion the creation of alternate economies within the spheres of graphemic and performative literary arts, culminating in a consideration of sound poetics of the 1970s, when McCaffery himself was (with bp nichol, Paul Dutton, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera) part of the Toronto-based group *The Four Horsemen*. A sort of Luddite sensibility informs his writing on this period:

Consciously developing (in part) from Tzara’s famous dictum that ‘thought is made in the mouth,’ the paleotechnic sound poetry of the 1970s was formulated around two primary desires: to create a poetry of spontaneous affect predicated on a paradigm of unrepeatability (this was the anti-technological component) and to reformulate the ‘poem’ as manifestation of unpremeditated and ephemeral community. Conceptually speaking, these readings pushed ontology toward polis, addressing the accidental configuration of two intermeshed ensembles – performers and audience – as an urgent issue of community.

He writes later: “Replacing the traditional author is a complex machinic assemblage generating performances that take the form of pulsional escapes from meaning and being, their release affected by a community of agents/‘poets’ functioning as a complex interrelation of transistors.” As the essay develops, however slightly, into a memoir of

this intense global movement toward communal poetics, McCaffery states that, indeed, “a scream can never be a social contact,” yet concludes:

This death of speech... entailed a theft of silence within sound. To paraphrase a thought of Valéry’s that captures with beauty and accuracy the circularity of this mission: a scream escapes from pain. Out of this accident a poem is made, with an explanation round about it. In this context, a scream acquires a role, a function. As was the case with Pascal’s thought: “I had a thought. I have forgotten it. In its place I write that I’ve forgotten it.”

Again, as in Andrews’s conception of Noise and Informalism, the social finds its entrance into the discursive realms of art via a primal negativizing that creates the space for community, though not the paradigms that ossify it into a series of tropes laid out for its being – rather for its “ephemeral” becoming.

As each essay in this volume seems to be “key” concerning some sphere of performative poetics – from the psycholinguistic preoccupations of Nick Piombino on “aural ellipsis” to Susan Stewart’s “Letter on Sound,” a study of the emotional component of Hopkins’ theories of sprung rhythm – it is difficult to consider all of the essays in even a cursory fashion in a review. Authors not yet mentioned include Peter Quartermain, Jed Rasula, Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman. The essays by the three remaining authors – Susan M. Schultz, Lorenzo Thomas and Maria Damon – seem to compose another group, in that they, while positing the “non-standard” versus “normative” poetic binary lurking in the essays discussed so far (described by Bernstein in his essay “Poetries of the Americas” in his recent collection, *My Way*), they also consider issues of ethnic and class formations that exist prior to aesthetic determinations, in this sense providing a documentary, perhaps “humanist,” backbone to formations of the “non-standard.” For example, Schultz’s essay, titled “Local Vocals: Hawai’i’s Pidgin Literature, Performance, and Postcoloniality,” considers the formation of a “minor literature” by the terms described in Deleuze and Guattari’s “What is a Minor Literature”:

[Deleuze and Guattari] argue that in minor literatures, “[l]anguage stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremes or limits.” Minor writers are those who “hate all languages of masters,” and who assert that “what can be said in one language cannot be said in another.” Minor writers produce

work that is inevitably political and that takes on collective value. Pidgin is such a non representative language, loud, extreme, and in this ironic manner, minor. For the pidgin writer the English language does not stop being representative so much as it stops being "universal," a dangerous word that is too often used to denote "dominant" rather than truly multicultural. The moment of strongest resistance by the pidgin writer to the dominant language and its "major" literature comes, to my mind, when that writer performs his or her text, either in public or on tape. It is the sound of pidgin, the resonance of its shared cultural references rather than its presence on the page, which is most different from standard English.

Earlier she describes a performance by the writer Lois Ann-Yamanaka as "social drama," in which the "spectators are performers," in this fashion approaching the discourse by McCaffery on sound poetry. Though one might consider this formulation of a hyper-referential poetics — or a poetics whose negativity extinguishes any myth of the "universal" through a mechanism of utilizing the referent to limn, however pointillistically, some sort of social boundaries (in this case defined by the binary of the "mainland" and the "islands") — as working in opposition to the Language poetics described in Andrews' essay, one notices that the primary mechanism of the poetry is the same, which is that the referent, such as the "Japan pencil cases" of Yamanaka's work that sent her audience (with the exception of Schultz) into hysterics, is freed from syntax to trace its own course in the community conscience, indeed flaunting its relevance. As Schultz observes, pidgin is censored in the schools of Hawai'i, and this situation of silencing a vital mode of communication provides the language with a contestatory power it might not have had otherwise, a Butlerian example of creating the subject out of the site of oppression. One is thus able to imagine the "mainland" writer such as Andrews or Howe in the position of having to create a "minor literature" from the state of political and aesthetic minority status. Indeed, part of the subtext of *Close Listening* is this possibility of American avant-garde writings being considered "ethnicized" to some extent, less self-consciously eccentric in a blind effort to continue 20th century innovation, and the pidgin literature of Hawai'i (not to mention such minor literatures from African American poetries to synthetic Scots) having a sort of futurist or constructivist element that less innovative analysis may have missed. Thomas' essay "Neon Griot: The Functional Role of Poetry Readings in the Black Arts Movement," and Damons' "Was that 'Different,'

'Dissident' or 'Dissonant'" both discuss, along with many other subjects, this essential issue of socially illegitimate ("dialect," counter-universal) languages and their social implications, the former through a broad survey of African American performative poetics from Francis Harper to Amiri Baraka to the present, the latter through an anecdotal yet detailed consideration of slams and the linguistic paradigms that could be used to determine (for example) which phrase is more "political," "Fuck da Police" or "Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe."

Close Listening is a unique intervention on the market of academic teaching texts, in that it includes a percentage of academically accepted writers such as Perloff, Quartermain and (to a lesser degree, perhaps) Damon, while also including writers whose reputations are only tenuous in that forum, and whose contributions are likely to be (happily) unserviceable for a standard classroom situation. Howe's essay, "Ether Either," which takes the idea of the particular to the extreme in its biographically-centered historicism, stands out in this instance. She describes, in the process, several types of "listening," from the "noise" and "negative copy" of the newspaper to the speech of John Henry Brodribb (1838-1905), a stutterer who became one of the major actors of his time ("the Garrick of his age"), though "in the opinion of many he never spoke Victorian or Elizabethan stage English correctly." Deviance is an important issue for Howe, both when writing of her own childhood when she was shuttled between Anglo-Irish and American families, but also because her grandfather was a stutterer who, in a small way, instigated a domestic reenactment of colonial linguistic standardization (not unusual in immigrant families). Howe writes of his stuttering:

The family was mortified by these consistently repeated episodes of immediacy versus constraint. Time and again they waited for whatever torturous narrative strategy might illustrate a happy ending was possible, the sentence could go on. One result of anxious familial scrutiny was the formidable emphasis his three children placed, not only on speaking correctly, but on moving speech, on audience response. During the 1940s Uncle Quincy became a newscaster for CBS, Aunt Helen toured the United States performing monologues in the manner of Ruth Draper, while my father prided himself on being able to lecture to large classes in perfect sentences never using notes.

Howe's concrete "transcription" of her grandfather's speech—a rectangle-shaped typewriter-face cascade of overwritten *hs*, *ks* and word-

fragments, more a concrete poem than a dramatic monologue — again illustrates those eccentric spaces outside of “standard” speech, spaces which both recording and print technology renders semi-permanent, and hence highly observable. How these spaces are culturally determined vary, but they can be utilized, perhaps as neo-Enlightenment dictionaries that grow with each spoken word, replacing the transparency of definition with the clangor of presence. Bernstein writes in his introduction:

If “orality” or the “semiotic,” aurality or logic, are stages, they are stages not on a path toward or away from immanence or transcendence but rather stages for performance: modalities of reason; prisms not prisons. Or let me put this in a different way: Perhaps the first writing was not produced by humans but rather recognized by humans. That is, it’s possible that the human inscriptions on the petroglyphs frame or acknowledge the glyphs already present on the rock face. Then we might speak of the book of nature, which we read as we read geologic markers or the rings around tree (“can’t see me!”).

Sound as “natural” — expression of the community, polis or party — sound as cyborgian (process-based) extension or machinic “scream” — or sound as plain speech (as in the talks of David Antin that Perelman describes) — in all instances it is clear that the voice has attained a new, if uncomfortable, peak of authority in determining the way poetry is to be discussed, as recording technologies have provided even the least adventurous or strategically-located poetry-goer (many of whom are in the schools) a way to take aural poetries into the home for “close listening.”

The Inkwell and the Future

POEMS FOR THE MILLENNIUM

ED. BY JEROME ROTHENBERG AND PIERRE JORIS

(UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1998)

Reviewed by Jefferson Hansen

POEMS FOR THE MILLENNIUM is a two-volume compendium of avant garde poetry in the twentieth century.

During the winter of 1996, one of the coldest in Minneapolis’ history, I read the first volume of *Poems for the Millennium* while taking the city bus to and from work. As my frigid hands warmed, I read poems from poets I’d never heard of: c.p. Cavafy, Hagiwara Sakutarō, Else Lasker-Schuler, Edith Sodergran, and so on.

Where had these people come from? Here I was, with a Ph.D. in u.s. poetry, ignorant of much that had happened beyond our borders (except for the obvious big names such as Mallarmé, Valéry, Mayakovsky, Akhmatova, and so on.) Much that I had assumed had been sown and reaped here had been at least preceded by the work of poets of other nations, if not directly influenced by it.

Kerouac’s hallucinatory road trips, for one, were anticipated by Blaise Cendrars’s:

I’m on the road
I’ve always been on the road
I’m on the road with little Jeanne of France
The train does a somersault and lands on all fours
The train lands on its wheels
The train always lands on all its wheels

Jefferson Hansen was the editor of *Poetic Briefs* from 1992-1998. His poetry recently appeared in *Abacus* and *Propjet*.

As I continued to ride and read, I felt my entire conception of poetry, and the u.s.'s place in it, alter. Poetry seemed to bubble over with possibility, to have more nooks and crannies than any one of us could explore, to have forgotten byways and dead ends that may not appear to be so dead on later inspection. These two volumes, with 1682 pages and measuring ten centimeters (we're global here) on a bookshelf, are surprisingly light and full of excitement.

This excitement extended to my considerably reduced view of the u.s.'s place in 20th-century poetry. This, too, I found freeing, since it meant that the u.s. was less absolute than it previously seemed to be. As the u.s.'s global hegemony shrinks, I feel freer. (This is not to say that the u.s. is not well and, perhaps, overly represented here.)

The experience I had on the bus reading the first volume offers a way into the importance of this anthology, which does not lie in its utility as a classroom device. If I, who have been rigorously trained in 20th-century poetry, am shockingly ignorant of much of this century's poetry, then many others with my background must share this ignorance. Students won't gain the most from this anthology—they will probably just be overwhelmed. Poets, teachers, and serious readers, those with enough background in poetry to provide some sort of context, stand the most to gain. Its greatest value may lie in its ability to re-educate the already educated, to offer a fuller and wider purview upon poetry.

II

The scope of these volumes is breath-taking. Poetry from Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe. A display of radically innovative poetry such as that of the Arechi group in post World War II Japan reveals a striking similarity to techniques, concerns and stances being explored in other parts of the world; namely, bringing everyday into the poem to replace the control of tradition:

I see through the trees, by the distant pool,
a white statue,
its genitals exposed.

(Tanikawa Shuntaro)

This urge to reveal the everyday is seen in u.s. poets such as Williams, Niedecker, and O'Hara. Also in this stanza is a haikulike imag-

ery. The poet is struggling to adhere to the new even as the old asserts itself. This struggle with ancient tradition can also be seen in the Tammuzi poets of the Arab world, who reached both forward into European modernist sources and backward to pre-Islamic Arab poets to develop a poetics consonant with their determination to help foster a new, post-colonial culture.

These sorts of connections and comparisons astound. Moving through the anthology is not only a temporal experience, which is true of most anthologies, but spatial as well. Joris and Rothenberg cause such connections to proliferate by placing a writer in many contexts. Some writers appear in a "gallery" with other writers, in a section on a movement they participated in, and in a special introductory section at the beginning of the second volume. While the anthology cannot develop any of the comparisons it creates at length, it does present avenues of inquiry for others.

Joris and Rothenberg's international arrangement presents irrefutable evidence of an international experimental tradition in 20th-century poetry. No more can Breton and Mallarmé be spoken of without also mentioning Aimé Césaire and Tchicaya U Tam'si. No more can Eliot and Rilke be mentioned without also mentioning César Vallejo. The avant-garde is shown to be more than simply a European and U.S. invention.

III

My one reservation about the anthology is that it does not take this international emphasis far enough. Even the editors agree with me when they write in the introduction to volume one, "for all the book's internationalism, we recognize that its focus is likely too American," and reiterate this sentiment in volume two. Joris and Rothenberg offer as an explanation that they work within the u.s. context and can't help but view the rest of the world from there. I wonder, however, if they couldn't have gone a little further. For example, included in a commentary on u.s. poet Jayne Cortez is a section from a poem by her that celebrates Christopher Okigbo, a Nigerian poet killed in the civil war in 1967 and widely considered one of the greatest and most experimental of Nigerian poets. Okigbo is not included in the anthology.

To be fair, once one gets to the nitty-gritty of why-this-poet-and-not-that-one, things get quickly boring and useless. Selection

is the essence of anthologizing and to read the anthology seriously is to accept it. Nonetheless, in this case I want to point out a pattern that even the editors are aware of. Apparently, they feel they didn't go too far in including u.s. poets rather than others. Readers are free to think differently.

Given what I've just said, I'm going to make a hypocrite of myself: I'm glad they included the u.s. poet Rochelle Owens. I had never heard of her before and fell for the energy and quirkiness of her lines. I am now in the process of hunting down her selected poems: I am grateful that Joris and Rothenberg did not cut her poems for the sake of giving more space to non-Americans.

This anthology is a landmark in my reading history. Never again will poetry seem so neat, so tight, so clear and simple. Never again will I wrongly credit u.s. poets with innovations not theirs, and never again will poetry seem to emanate from so few roots. These books are destined to be the definitive representation of twentieth century world poetry in English and English translation for a long time to come.

Why I Love A Stanza

By Henry Gould

SOMETHING THERE IS (to paraphrase an American poet who did) that doesn't love a stanza. Eliot's "Sweeney" stanzas are annoyingly arch and archaizing—you can tell he was secretly bored, ready to stretch out. Pound lost no time not only breaking the pentameter but breaking out of the stanza. Even those major poets who used stanzas—Stevens, Moore, Williams—are clearly focused on other things: the meditative flow, the diction, the line rhythm. Of course there have been many u.s. poets who use stanzas, and periods in which they were prevalent; but for the more innovative, modern & postmodern poets, the stanza is out. Why is this? The American "primal need" for elbow room?

Maybe I love stanzas because I come from a lot of engineers and builders, on both sides. Houses, barns, grain elevators, sewage treatment plants... The word stanza comes from "room" in Italian. Perhaps there's also an etymological link with "station" (stagione) too (as in stations of the cross, way stations), which I like to believe. The stanza, not the line, is the basic building block of poetry's musicality—rhythm and harmonics.

Regarding rhythm, the stanza provides two things: a steady pause and a concentration of energy. Two sides of the same coin. The pause—the empty space between the movement of each stanza—accentuates the variations of those movements, like meter on a macro scale. The concentration of energy—the implosive force within each stanza—does the very same thing: sharpening, intensifying the coloration of each word and phrase.

Henry Gould's "neo-sonnet cycle" *Island Road* can be found online in Mudlark (<http://www.unf.edu/mudlark>). His book *Fox Point* is forthcoming from Zasterle Press.

The case of harmonics is more interesting. Music, again, is two things, rhythm and harmonics. Harmonics consists of the modulation between varied chord intervals. Now think of the poem as a series of equal, repeating stanzas. Think of this series as a straight line. Now think of the variation of tone, diction, timbre between each stanza as a curved line: a modulation, a development. The expanding and contracting intervals between the straight line of repeating stanzas and the curved line of modulation is a musical structure. Do you see how we have just constructed a Roman arch? The variations on this basic curve (tonic-dominant-tonic) are infinite.

The clearest, purest example of how this works can be found in the brief, endlessly-honed, three-quatrain poems of Osip Mandelstam's Voronezh cycles. Here is exhibited what variety can be drawn from the simplest of stanzaic structures, what depth of feeling and breadth of meaning. Emily Dickinson is the obvious counterpart in U.S. poetry; perhaps she alone recognized the extent of potential lurking in stanzaic structure.

Let me try to illustrate with the following untitled poem from Mandelstam's *Second Voronezh Notebook*:

He can still remember the wear and tear on his shoes,
and the worn grandeur of my soles.
I, in turn, remember him: his many voices,
his black hair, how close he lived to Mount David.

The pistachio-green houses on the fox-hole streets
have been renovated with whitewash or white of egg;
balconies incline, horseshoes shine, horse-balcony,
the little oaks, the plane trees, the slow elms.

The feminine chain of curly letters
is intoxicating for eyes enveloped in light.
The city is so excessive and goes off into the timbered forest
and into the young-looking, ageing summer.

[Voronezh, 7-11 Feb. 1937] (1)

This poem is quiet and unobtrusive. One must make allowances for the fact of translation. One must understand that Mandelstam was in exile in Voronezh; his longtime literary affinity for Ovid, the native of Rome exiled to the distant Black Sea, had become more than literary.

One of the more painful aspects of exile was simple loneliness—a longing for artistic and intellectual companionship. This poem is in part a remembrance of a fellow poet and a lament for his absence. Observe the intertwining of the first two lines: the absent friend remembers his own worn shoes (a metaphor for poetic creation—see M's *Conversation About Dante*), and then remembers the speaker's shoes too—all of which the speaker is recalling now as well, in the poem. The third and fourth lines mark a further turn—the speaker bringing to the fore his memory of the friend (presumably a Georgian poet—Mount David is a mountain on the outskirts of Tiflis). So we have at least three “turns” of memory in the first stanza.

These turns are replicated and magnified in the three stanzas of the poem as a whole. They can be interpreted in many ways: mine is simply one perspective. The first stanza presents a situation fairly directly: the memory of an absent friend. The second stanza turns away from this pain: it is a sort of talking around an issue, a diversion; an attempt to find beauty and poetry in the small provincial town where he is forced to remain. The third line of the second stanza—“balconies incline, horseshoes shine, horse-balcony”—is almost a parody of Mandelstam's method of building poems out of verbal echoes (“horse-shoe” is the central image of his great poem “The Horseshoe Finder”, representing poetry as both the unbreakable link between remote ages and the pathetic remainder of a long-dead world). The third stanza rewards the attempt of the second. Here the poet's entry into his surroundings becomes an integration: “curly letters” and “eyes enveloped in light” are intoxicating. But the integration is shadowed with acquiescence and renunciation: the whole city goes off into the timbered forest and the “young-looking, ageing summer”. This is not simply a negative movement by any means; there is a clear elegiac quality to these lines, an acceptance of the inevitable.

I have chosen this particular poem because it displays the harmonics outlined above with such simplicity. The modulation from direct memory, to observation of his surroundings, to final celebration/mourning, is made possible—is made musical—by its regular stanzaic structure. The straight line of the repeated stanzas provides the foundation for the “turns” of the arch. The timbre, the counterbalanced emotion of sadness/acceptance of the final stanza is built on the structure itself. The summer is “young-looking, ageing”: the stanzas ring their

changes as they *remain the same*—a demonstration of basic chordal harmonics.

A few years earlier Mandelstam had written a series of eleven octets whose subject was the creative process itself. The first two of these—two variations on a single theme—illustrate this “arch” structure becoming reflexive, “self-conscious”:

I love seeing the canvas appear,
two, three, sometimes
four gasps
leading to a resolving sigh -
and sketching out open forms
in racing-boat-arcs,
space plays, half-awake -
a child unaware of the cradle.

I love seeing the canvas appear,
two, three, sometimes
four gasps
leading to a resolving sigh -
and I feel so good, and I feel such pain,
when the moment comes closer -
and suddenly an arc-like lengthening
can be heard in my mumbling. (2)

An appreciation of the stanza is a straight road into the musicality of verse. If more American poets traveled down this road, perhaps we would not have to read so much writing that mimics the tuneless jabber of a word processing program gone haywire.

NOTES

(1) from *The Voronezh Notebooks*, translated by Richard and Elizabeth McKane; Bloodaxe Books, 1996. p.73.

(2) from *Complete Poetry of Osip Mandelstam*, translated by Burton Raffel and Alla Burago; SUNY Press, 1973, pp.224-225.