

W I T Z

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Martin Nakell on *Bartleby the Writer*

"Bartleby engages the original act of writing, the act of scription itself. He is the scriptor. He refines the act of writing, clarifies it of the cumbersome clutter of meaning and form. No other writer in the history of writing in the history of fiction is so clearly a writer, so truly a writer, so honestly a writer..."

Dan Featherston on Olson and Y2K

"For Olson, the Y2K problem pushes us back way before 1900. The Second Coming returns us to the first, "last" people hemmed in by the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps Heraclitus was the only true prophet of time. With no Second Coming in sight, Olson's prophecy for the millennium still holds: "The affairs of men remain a chief concern"."

Patrick Pritchett on Tom Mandel

Standard Schaefer on Jean Day

Brian Kim Stefans on Jeff Derksen



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EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER REINER

Bartleby The Writer

By Martin Nakell

Prologue and Apologia: Bartleby was written in 1853. This pensée upon Bartleby, written in 1999, pretends at no explanation of what Melville wrote in 1853, or necessarily of what Bartleby means in 1999. It enters, now, again, into the continuous dialogue with the story Melville wrote. It intends to displace no other theory or reading of Bartleby. It continues the work Bartleby left: it is writing in the presence of the refusal to write.

Bartleby quits writing. That is his root radical act. It is not the first thing to which he says no, and neither is it the last thing, but it is the crucial thing. I prefer not to, he says, and he means that he prefers not to continue writing. What is this cessation, this rupture, the clarity which radiates from this refusal? With all of Bartleby's work still on his desk, to be done, Bartleby, who was a writer, can no longer be said to be a writer. He is a figure etched out of the grotesqueness of his death into the barely discernible nearly diaphanous ubiquitous mythic character of the writer.

Bartleby did not choose not to leave the Law Office, he did not choose to be arrested, he did not choose to be incarcerated, he did not choose to die. He chose not to do proofreading, then he chose not to do errands, then he chose not to write. All else flowed therefrom.

It is not a fault, but a preference that the form of Bartleby's writing is that of the scrivener. Bartleby is not a writer of fiction, of poetry, of essays, even of legal documents. Bartleby's writing has nothing to do with content, almost nothing to do with form, but everything to do with the act of writing. Every writer copies in every writing. The source of the writer's copying may be hidden. It may be some vision, copied into language. It may be some re-told story, copied over anew and re-told again into the living moment. It may be only the memory of a word, and it may be that word misremembered, metamorphosed by context into another word. Derrida makes it clear in *Of Grammatology*

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that writing is not an inferior form of speech. But even when poets, such as Wordsworth or William Carlos Williams, for example, copy speech directly into their poems, that speech is transformed in the process. The writing is not an inferior, reportorial form of the speech; the speech now has acquired a different, new quality: it has the quality of writing, as it has the potential quality of being read, which is again a different act from being heard, in conversation, for example. Thus, there is not a conflict between the idea that all writing is a form of copying, and the idea that writing is not an inferior form of speech (or picture, or dream image, etc.).

Because Bartleby is not concerned with content, hardly concerned with form, his is not a derivative writing, but the most original of all writing, that whose purpose can ignore the problem of the derivative. Bartleby's is the act of writing itself, it is pen, paper, ink, the position at the desk, it is the eyes which see the words from the source-text and it is the closeness, the obviousness of that source-text that make him original, for Bartleby engages the original act of writing, the act of scription itself. He is the scriptor. He refines the act of writing, clarifies it of the cumbersome clutter of meaning and form. No other writer in the history of writing in the history of fiction is so clearly a writer, so truly a writer, so honestly a writer. This act of copying, this original act of entering the irrational gorge the unknowable landscape with complete faith to retrieve from it the act of writing and not be concerned with the content or hardly form is so self-evidently an act of beauty to begin with.

It is not that Bartleby ignores meaning or form. He is unconcerned with them. He accepts the meaning and the form as given to him because they are as equal to any meaning, any form. They satisfy him. They are gist for writing, writing is the cause. In the process of writing both the meaning and the form pass through Bartleby's consciousness. He awakens to them. Because they are a given, Bartleby does not suffer the interference of inspiration, of thought, of construction. Nothing intrudes between Bartleby and the word in the act of its formation. Bartleby hears in his mind each word as he writes.

We must imagine that Bartleby chose to write. We can offer up as evidence the fact that Bartleby chose not to write. (A corollary: the other scribes in Bartleby's office — or elsewhere — have not chosen to write, they are those who cannot choose not to write.) So it is

Bartleby alone who is this original writer. Any scrivener who chooses to write could attain the same status. But Melville's narrator tells us that "I waive the biographies of all other scribes, for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener, the strangest I ever saw, or heard of."

Bartleby has come from his position at the Dead Letter Office, where all he could do was to handle "dead letters," assort them "for the flames." Not just dead epistles, but literally, dead letters, the letters of the words themselves have died. This is Bartleby's necessary, rigorous apprenticeship. This is where Bartleby learns of the possibility of death inherent in letters. This detail of Bartleby's life we learn not early on in the story, but at the very end, almost as an appendage, almost an afterthought. But what is thought after becomes primary. It cannot significantly be thought until the preceding is known.

When Bartleby comes to the Law Office, he enters his new profession of scrivener with an automated rapaciousness. "...Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing." He is making each one of those letters live. "As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically."

As if trying to outpace writing, to outwrite writing. Writing, after his position in the Dead Letter Office is the only thing which would revive Bartleby so that Bartleby could revive writing. It is the only act which would fill him with enough of the elixir of writing that it might counteract the dosage of death he received from the Dead Letter Office. But writing is not only the life-force, the act of energy, it is to be in the presence of death as well. Vico has it that all poetry is about death, no matter its putative subject, because the source of poetry is in the chants and dances of primitive tribes who exorcised the anxiety of death through these rituals. Therefore, per Vico, each poem re-enacts this anxiety ritual, bringing death to life so that life can survive. Poetry, chanting, or writing (not equal, but equivalent) can only assert life in the face of the threat of death. Is that what Bartleby discovered in his orgy of writing? Is that the point at which he pronounced: I prefer not to. Had Bartleby gone so far as to despair of the salvation inherent in the act of writing. Was he overwhelmed with the enormity of his task?

Was he suddenly aware of its futility? Or had Bartleby gone so far as to discover, as Nietzsche suggests ("how he that says No and *does* No to an unheard-of degree, to everything to which one has so far said Yes, can nevertheless be the opposite of a No-saying spirit."), that Bartleby had seen not the death, but the negation at the heart of his writing. Having done so, he recognized that to reveal that negation he had to refuse, to negate, to say no without becoming a nay-saying person, to say no in order to announce the totality of the act of writing.

Nietzsche, in *Ecce Homo*: "...how he that says No and *does* No to an unheard-of degree, to everything to which one has so far said Yes, can nevertheless be the opposite of a No-saying spirit." Let me re-cast that slightly. Only by saying no to an unheard-of degree to everything to which one has so far said Yes, can one be the opposite of a No-saying spirit. It would be amicable to assert that within the heart of Bartleby's No there resides, there grows, there radiates a Yes. But the radical nature of Bartleby's act is to annihilate that imperishable Yes, by which annihilation this No can be seen. Were it a no of spite, a no of exhaustion, a no of victory, a no against society, were it a no against god, were it a no to loneliness, to despair, to habit, to world-weariness, a no even to happiness, a no to social communion, a no to the future in honor of the present, a no to death, a no to fear or trembling, a no to freedom, it would have within it the kernel of that Yes to germinate even to sprout on the page in front of us. But if anything must blossom it must be this no. We cannot take refuge in a hidden yes, we must take refuge only in the revelation of I prefer not to.

Bartleby says no to writing. From that everything else flows: consternation, confusion, reaction, death, love.

In his crucial moment Bartleby says I prefer not to. I prefer not to write. He says No and *does* No to an unheard-of degree, to everything to which he has so far said Yes. How then does he become the opposite of a nay-saying spirit? That thing we must fear most.

Having asked a question, I have to say that there are many answers, many more than I can imagine, let alone subscribe. Some surely reside yet with Bartleby either in his grave or in his incarnation as the mythic writer.

At the most evident level, Bartleby exposes the No which might go by so many other names or go even nameless, untranslating into language. It may be called at one period in history the Thanatos or the

Instinct for Thanatos. It might be called by another a lonely impulse of delight. In another age it might be called Will, the Triumph of the Will, Negative Self, the Will to Power exercised in a vacuum of powerlessness, it might be Blake. It might be called Urizen, Poseiden, Zeus. Kafka. Death.

But to achieve the act of becoming the opposite of a nay-saying spirit it must adopt the qualities of all these names, then discard them, maintaining echoes of them as memory. For to become that which says no to everything to which one has said yes, while becoming the opposite of a nay-saying spirit, is something which can be accomplished in writing, in the act of writing, in the act of refusing to write. An alchemical change takes place then in the cognitional relationship between the ink, the letter, the writer, the person. It is a circular relationship which does not complete its circularity, whose circularity is broken (always was broken) by the No. It cannot be done in music because it must be done with the word No. It cannot be done in dance because it must be done with the word No. It cannot be done in art because it must be done with the word, No. I prefer not to. It must be done first at the stage in Western Civilization at which Bartleby does it, when the act of saying No — as the act of writing — has not yet been critically understood, but will soon be taken for what it is: the saying of No without becoming a nay-saying person.

It is not silence that Bartleby proposes, although silence appears to be its consequence. Silence is an invention of consciousness which succeeds Bartleby.

Writing is not the ultimate act of affirmation. Affirmation precedes writing, or, certainly, we can say that affirmation is born at the very latest at the instant of writing. It is not certainly born any later, not after the moment of writing. Writing is in a razor-sharp whirlwind with affirmation where carelessness can kill the writing. It is not this affirmation which Bartleby denies when he says, I prefer not to. It is the act of writing itself which he denies, perhaps because that act, in the original form in which Bartleby practices it, contains everything. If it contains affirmation, it contains despair. If it contains triumph, it contains defeat. If it contains the deferral of time, it contains the illusion of time. If it contains the human, it contains the unnameable. If it contains sorrow, it contains cruelty. If it contains history, it contains contradiction. If it contains the present, it contains the conditional

tense. If it contains visual phantasmagoria, metaphore, metonymy, hyperbole, color, image, it contains the void, it contains the word. What Bartleby practices is pure writing, the act of writing. Bartleby is the writer not in the sense that he is someone who thinks of writing, makes a profession of writing, identifies herself as a writer, poses as a writer. Bartleby is a writer because each day he comes to his office and there he writes. All day. So that at the end of his long day he has practiced not his art or his craft and not even his ritual but his unconditional. He has written. With his hand, with his ink, with his pen.

Bartleby, in his descent, enlightens. We have no other fictional writer, not in Don Quixote, not in The Thousand and One Nights, who chooses to stop writing. This is the particular genius of Melville, of Bartleby. For Don Quixote, for the Thousand and One Nights, the narrative must extend in order for life to go on. Once the narrative, the narrator is exhausted, the tale is over. Once Bartleby stops, writing continues. Any one of us pick up Bartleby's pen at that point, and he has signaled us to do so. Every one of us willing to accept Bartleby's terms, his recognition. And indeed, Don Quixote dies, his narrative ended, his humane pathos accomplished. And indeed there are A Thousand and One tales. But for Bartleby, there is the act of writing itself, which, by stilling, he set in perpetual motion, a phenomena which I believe still does not exist in the language of science.

The Fulfilling Word

By Patrick Pritchett

The problem of transmission is fundamental to Judaism, indeed to the idea of culture itself. The anxieties of establishing continuity go to the very heart of what we mean by memory. How may the past be guaranteed to the future? How is culture carried over and mediated from one generation to the next? How is identity formed and reformed in its endless conversations with the dead? And how do the dead speak to us? Charles Reznikoff opens his great poem, "By The Well of Living and Seeing" with these lines:

My grandfather died long before I was born,
died among strangers; and all the verse he wrote
as lost —
except for what still speaks through me
as mine.

Here, transmission is envisioned as something enacted with a degree of autonomy, not necessarily to be read as genetic, but rather, perhaps, as a set of codes perpetuated in and by language itself.

Tom Mandel's haunting *Prospect of Release* (Chax Press, \$12.95) undertakes the task of recovering the lost primary mode of transmission — the death of a parent. In this intricate series of 50 sonnets written in elegy for his stepfather, Mandel articulates the iterations of sorrow with all the laconic rue and gravity of rabbinical injunction. Austerity becomes the principle not of denudation but replenishment. To start at Aleph, the zero, the nadir — the place of irremediable loss — is simultaneously to engage the plenitude of language as response to the dead, to make from the bare ruined choir of an unrequited antiphonal longing the forms of solace, that are also the forms of inheritance, of transmission. For Mandel, as for Jabes, to confront death

means to confront the very nature of language itself. How do we mourn the loss of the Other, these poems ask, while knowing that the words we use to connect also betray us with every breath? The form of all our knowing is language — “the King’s highway” — as Mandel calls it. How we travel on this road, and what congress it maintains between its own public discourse and our private soliloquies, is just one of the many themes this book so brilliantly engages, not so much through elegy as by the quest for — and the questioning of — elegy.

Long associated with Language Poetry, Mandel in his previous book, *Letters of the Law*, began an investigation of the relationship between language, consciousness and codification which drew deeply on the tradition of Jewish law and mysticism that has always made those concerns its own. *Prospect of Release* in many ways continues that investigation, but on a much more intimately modulated and poignant scale. The marvel of the book is that the poignancy is achieved through a stripped down diction that plays alertly and harmonically on key ideas and phrases, and by a subdued, formal rhythm perfectly consonant with the starkness of the poet’s grief, his sense of loss. Loss here remains loss — what cannot be replaced — and yet: “Don’t lance his healed wounds,” the poet enjoins, following the steps of the ancient Judaic prescription for mourning, its stern psychology. Loss is also what enables transmission from one person to another to occur; it creates a “reverence modeled on absence.” The form of language — “our rigorous oral tradition” — encodes the way of compassionate living. “Not stasis, neither gnosis is your goal.” And even though, as the poet laments, “Grief’s code of desire cannot be read,” it is nevertheless through language that he is permitted entry to the ongoing engagement and renewal of the world, a process not to be confused with history, or even nature, both “idols formed from false propositions.” “Of the ten things made at twilight/the greatest was ‘speech-act.’” Therefore, “vowels, bring on morning. Consonants, cause the sun to set.” Through utterance, we embody a world.

In the *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mitsvoth*, according to Gershom Scholem, souls cluster in communal groups and may return to aid the living during times of crisis. “For the dead of each and every family ... are like the roots of a tree, and its branches are the living, for the living

exist by virtue of the merits of the dead.” Mandel’s poems seem to draw nourishment from this idea: “Like the living the dead are many,/ connected in all traces to the common social order.” This affirmation of communality takes its strength from Judaic tradition, but also recalls Joyce’s “the cords of all link back: strandentwining cable of all flesh.” To link to the dead, for Mandel, is both the expression of grief and the nominalization of a self in opposition to an absence:

I speak to establish my
isolation from you, the object of
my address, whose silence unattainable

listens but cannot respond. Only tears
interrupt such words; tears are
a trope for the presence of the dead.

The motions of grief are one and the same with the motions of remembering. The conjuration of the dead, that is so necessary for establishing the sense of communal continuity, is performed not by some necromantic apostasy, but through the sanctifying figurations of the poem. That which is absent is again made present, if only at a distance, if only at that remove inaugurated and solemnized by the gestures of invocation. Seen this way, it is the living who endure an exile from the dead, one that is redeemed by the tropes of memory. Above all, this exile is redeemed by the highest of speech-acts, the poem.

In his essay on Judaism, “The Indestructible,” Maurice Blanchot writes that Judaism exists as a means to affirm the nomadic quality of being human: “through exile ... and exodus ... the experience of strangeness may affirm itself ... as an irreducible relation ... so that ... we might learn to speak.” The project of living, which is also the project of life’s relation to death, might be described in just the same way. By the death of He-Who-Is-Loved, the poet is compelled to express the exactness of that relation between the dead and the living, the fulcrum and the hinge from which depends the all-that-is-sayable:

Interrupting each other thus, we make
language whole, grounding in speech
both isolation and resolution. We give
exemplary articulation to life and death.

Forming one meta-sonnet, these poems sustain their meditation on death and the possibilities of language through a structure both hermetic and open, enacting a syntax of repetition which continually questions and re-affirms language's power to transmit "our rigorous oral tradition." Unlike traditional elegies, these poems don't presume to circumscribe grief by leveraging memory into the recreation – the buyout – of the vanished Other through an accumulation of mundane detail. Rather, they subject the appeal to memory, and its assumptions, to what might be called a poetics of absence. By signifying absence – the total evacuation of the self – presence may actually stand out beyond itself, revealed in the aura of its unsignifying *numinosum*. Blanchot, again, from *The Space of Literature*:

the lack is the being that lies deep in the absence of being ... the lack is what still remains of being when there is nothing ... when everything has disappeared, there is still something: when everything lacks, lack makes the essence of being appear, and the essence of being is to be there still where it lacks, to be inasmuch as it is hidden (252-53).

Dwelling at the margins of the sayable, *Prospect of Release* rescues the relation with the Other from the totalizing gesture of language. This steady refusal to collapse difference, not to annul the anxiety it stands in through appeals to conventional sentiment, gives these elegies a uniquely ethical distinction. Mandel's concerns are not unlike those of Emmanuel Levinas, who writes of the Other in his *Totality and Infinity* that: "The relation with the other does not nullify separation ... does not establish a totality, integrating me and the Other ... Rather ... the relation of me and the Other commences in the inequality of the terms."

You are my second, one says to the other,
whom repetition changes and explains,
bearer of identity, yet other –
my stand-in and myself.

Identity is both the measure of the gap between selves and what passes over that gap via transmission, the utterance and re-utterance of words, instructions, even those tears that are "a trope for the dead." On the King's Highway, "repetition transforms our route." Or as Mandel writes in another sonnet: "an ultimate letter/chants the text it changes

..." In this sense, all writing is an enacting of a colloquy with the dead, with *what has already passed*, figuring through the ancient and various tropes of emptiness and absence a presence, it may be, that is beyond presence.

Do not speak of these
words but repeat them, accompany me,
understand the strength of transmission,
the authority of the lonely in the meaning
of words ...

In the meaning of words, the authority of the lonely is that which insists on itself, which makes of its isolation a bride to a meaning that the dead once occupied, and once invested with their living. But even to say so is already to have moved on, to have passed, and in passing reject both history and nature, those "idols formed from false propositions." Instead: "the answer is/to be what's named, the category/of person ..." By the authority of the naming, the task of the living becomes the transmission of a new code, a re-naming and a re-drawing of the circle which embraces both the living and the dead. ("Es war ein Kreis," Mandel quotes Celan in the book's epigraph - "it was a circle" – and indeed, the entire sequence of sonnets moves in a circularity whose action continually re-inscribes the relations between self and other, performing a shuttle between the question and the affirmation, the call and the response).

These profoundly moving poems are a speaking for the dead in which the dead continue to record their fevers: what they burned for when alive, and what still burns the living. But the dead are also the metaphor through which we try to speak the presentness of our living: the instantiating moment that both eludes and propels us – the sense of our own otherness, in opposition to the non-being of the dead, as it comes to us through the medium of their unending transmissions. *Prospect of Release* not only performs a reinvigorated Kaddish, a new inscription and recuperation of the Book of Departure, it also recovers for us what might be called a Bardo for the living, a set of instructions from which we may learn how to endure and reconfigure the absent presence of the dead. "The story that prepared us," the text of the

father, "has died." Yet the process of re-inscription is fructifying, as Mandel makes clear in his beautiful translation of Isaiah:

Like dew, rain and snow descending
to fructify earth, my word falls from my mouth
to do my will and does not return
unfulfilled but completes the task of my intentions.

To become an interlocutor with the dead, of the dead, for the dead, as Tom Mandel has done in these poems with such an extraordinary combination of tenderness and acuity, is still and always to assay mortal things — to go up against the place where, as Derrida says, "limits tremble," and the tongue breaks off. The elegy becomes nothing less than an effort to recover first things by naming last things. Negation, the erasure of self and of form, is transformed. The poem enacts the supreme moment of chiasmus, of the intersection between convergence and divergence, between embodying presence and self-emptying absence. Out of absence and silence, it re-constitutes a new form and continuity, here where we always are, at the horizon of speech.

A Mutual Autobiography

by Standard Schaefer

In the preface to Jean Day's *The Literal World*, she defines meaning as a "dialect we speak at home." Home, of course, is always shifting in and out of the personal. Day herself describes the book as a "mutual autobiography." With schizophrenic assaults on common sense and the vernacular, Day flirts with romance, adventure genres, and from a family tradition of sermonizing. In doing so, Day also suggests that poetry is more like a confidence game and should be so in order that the medium can be used to expose the corruption and idealism of the quotidian.

Such acts such as doing the laundry and walking up the stairs, often drenched in irony, nonetheless become suspended, delayed, interrupted by inserting moments of lucid statement, emotive assertion, and nomadic digressions through quite stylized memories. The result is that she approaches humor, the art of the surface, rather than mere irony, the art of depths and heights.

In "Narratives from the Crib," for example, Day's infant speaker wants to describe what it is like to be a baby, but is prevented from doing so by the actual practical problems: "I was asked to be specific but could only wave my hands." Nevertheless, the child manages to make the precocious suggestion that all babies are little bourgeois in so far as the world revolves around them and yet they, the infants, finds the whole matter "too breezy" and "full of noise" to be worth getting involved actively. The infant describes how as his/her "body rises ever nearer completion" that it becomes more distracting. Even the adults are distracted by the infant's growth. Even the child sees this inevitability as preventing it from doing its appointed duty: to act as a metaphor for the nostalgia of adults.

While "Narratives from the Crib" is perhaps the most humorous piece in the collection, a short series called "Tale" may be the most

intricate. For one reason, the cover of the book features a photograph from Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man* and the beginning of this series involves a woman carving a canoe, much the same way as Johnny Dep's character does in the film. Jarmusch's film is a sort of journey into a variety of Sames, but it is ultimately addressing monotony. The pace of that film is deliberately slow and repetitious. Day, too, takes a journey into sameness, into the present, but she uses speed and suspense. The effect is one of creating a tale from familiar elements without becoming a degraded copy. Asserting that "the tourist himself looked dead," Day's work affirms itself as artifice and it denies the origin of the work as merely the first copy. The mixing of genre contributes to this sense along with the ideas of incest and cannibalism all of which she uses to suggest that even a single point of view is in conflict with itself. Even morning is a "process of triangulation." Irony, what Day calls our "dowry" is set into abeyance. The reader is aware of an inheritance, but is uncertain to receive it in any way other than "incoherent speeches".

Because language is an interrupting force for Day, she shifts from elements of fairy tale to American folk songs to Russian history and thus captures the humorous, superficial way that language binds and divides society over and over. Nonetheless, she is attracted both to language and society (in a way that perhaps Jarmusch is not). Day affirms the chaos and diversity that makes language so exciting and brings readers back to the world with a renewed vigor, a desire to create and cause havoc, and a sense of possibility: "To be a thing about to happen," she says, "to bask in the light of taboo".

Temp Agency

by Brian Kim Stephans

Jeff Derksen begins his essay "Sites Taken as Signs: Place, the Open Text and Enigma in New Vancouver Writing" by posing the question: "In the face of corporate constructions of our subjectivity that reduce a person to a 'living example', how can we assert a space for the subject that goes beyond the limited official versions?" The specificity of this question is undermined somewhat by that very last phrase — "official versions" — for it is an officialdom that has become attached not only to the manipulations of a dominant business entities, but also government *and* mainstream poetics, that union of the academy, workshops and fine booksellers. Derksen wants a poetics that corrupts a corporate sense of ubiquity and completeness, and which at the same time affirms the autonomy of the self-as-citizen, the subject that is able to respond to social realities from beyond the perimeters. For example, Canadian interpretive paradigms tend to see the geographical landscape — even when dislocated, as in the case of islands (Derksen cites a poem by Margeret Atwood) — as unified, unchanging in an arena of Cartesian perspectivism; such metaphors when describing Canada's sense of nationhood (illustrating the multicultural "mosaic," for example) erase the differentness of the differences it claims to "include". The result is an official "monologic" poetics, an exclusive or leveled representation that contributes to the government's "nation-building agenda" over a complicating heteroglossia that is permissive of alien discourses. Regionalism, when it becomes a "funded phenomenon," is, according to Derksen, quite different from the type of localism that Charles Olson actuated, in which the particularity of the local served to bring the (male) individual to a sort of bodily completion, a sense of signature, against technology's intrusions; however, both the official Canadian and Olson's understanding of the local are similar, in that both subsume the other that it wants to con-

tain — in Canada's case the disparate entities of its population, in Olson's case, women and Mayans — in a quest for the completion of a "self" that is unified and uncomplicated.

One element generally absent from Canadian poetics is the vastness of the self-as-cosmos that has typified much of the American poetry experience since the nineteenth century, and is struggling to resurface now even after the disaster of Pound and new readings of Olson's poetics, which see his quest for space as expressions of a modified colonial ambition. On the other hand, Derksen, both in his poetics and his long poem *Dwell*, has not entirely sacrificed the biographical "I," nor has he attempted to mask it under pastiche or irony. While Derksen and many other Canadian writers of Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing (he was one of the founding members) are often associated with writers of the "language" school, certain important distinctions in both practice and paradigms tend to make them appear dissimilar. For example, writers like Bruce Andrews and Lyn Hejinian subsume the "self" under a more pervasive activity of complicating the word-to-object relation through an almost rule-based writing which renders a centeredness of the art work — one is reminded of the "all overness" of Jackson Pollock — either difficult to perceive or irrelevant, and in this way the unified voice itself. Once a multivalent, often excessive method or style has been assumed for a particular work (as in *My Life* or *I Don't Have Any Paper, So Shut Up*), it is maintained without much change in a general *type* of vocabulary, a level of syntax, or in the word-to-object relationship and tone, so that the surface, despite the agitation and polyphony of music (or even *voices*), remains consistent. The "self" is either present or absent in a fairly regular manner throughout, and one is not surprised by the sudden appearance of the centralizing author's "I" or something resembling a lyrical poetics (contrasts from the modernist canon include *Paterson* and "A", both of which change formal gears dramatically within the work). Charles Bernstein, who tends to write shorter poems and who is less interested in cranking up a *modus operandi* at the head of a long work — like John Cage, for example, in his "readings" of literature like *Finnegans Wake* or the *Cantos* — often permits breaks in his language in which the fickle, authorial "I" will make its presence, but he is usually engaged in an act of high irony, sometimes so high that the nature of the irony itself is the main invention of the poem.

This isn't always been the case with Bernstein, and there is no way to "sum up" the range of his methods and interests (nor those of Andrews and Hejinian), but his tendency to use the most jarring artifice and his occasional terrorizing of academic sanctifications of the literary canon — a concern with education issues — keep his project distinct from what appears in *Dwell*.

Though Derksen demonstrates a great ability to maneuver through terms and subtleties that are often reserved for university theses and academic discourses, *Dwell* is remarkably humorous, direct, and musical. Though one can't say that it is "divided into" sections, since there are no numbers denoting the separations, there appears to be types of poems that are included and grouped within the poem. The first section, or sub-poem, "Interface," is a series of single-line units that can be either "one-liners" (often hilarious, yet strangely solemn) that stand on their own, or lines which defiantly deny any ready interpretation, and hence point only to their place as elements in the string — "Soviet Union 24.9%" for example, and "United States 18.3%," which are statistics, though uncontextualized. The play between these lines is what both binds this poem together and yet drives its centrifugal motion for 17 pages:

A layered invention, looking in its own window.

That binding arbitration of lip to neck or hips to hoola hoop.

France 8.9 %.

It was bad news coming even from a hundred miles away or, after adapting, we grew to like the rattlesnake necktie.

The percentage of blacks in the U.S. Armed Forces is higher than many other industries — this was talked about as a progressive step.

Apparently, they'd been doing it like that for years.

A used car battery sells for \$1.50.

One hundred and thirty eight pounds of joy.
There is none of the throw-away quality of some "language" and New York school poetry in these lines, for they are transparent and yet politicized in a way that renders the numerous vectors of meaning a

high priority, and which creates a tension in the poet to *get it right*; in fact, the microscopic modulation and bid for permanence that these lines make are distinctive characteristics. Another group of poems within *Dwell* retain some of the pacing of "Interface," and yet are broken into lines that are often lyrical, satirical, or allusive, often utilizing those "pregnant pauses". The following is the beginning of "Phallic Coffee":

The pure phrases are aggressive
and our only contact
is commerce. A tiered role model
is "speaking up" physically.

This is the oldest city
known to typography -
an exclamation point
off the coast. It's undone

business of history
by the sea, the fort
at the end of the point
is a military base. "Todo
por la patria" is red,
yellow, and sedimentary.

"Phallic Coffee" is resonant with echoes from American poets — Williams, Olson and even Ashbery's "Rivers and Mountains" seem present here — whose poems are being implicated in a partially erased yet omnipresent discourse that refuses, nonetheless, to construct judgments. (One thing that might be demonstrated in Derksen's lines — and which makes this partial absence possible — would be the presence of a metaphysical, almost Symbolist, ambiguity which is absent from the materialist poetics of writers like Bernstein or Andrews.) Other poems include a sort of fragmented, probably semi-fictional (though entirely "true") travelogue/prose-poem called "'Hold Onto Your Bag Betty,'" which deals with the empirical hunger of tourists that renders even our most pure desires to simply record our journeys a complicated, colonizing affair: "A tree that looks cactuslike, growing straight up without any branches or tapering much in circumference, which is used to make ladders. 'You could pluck a geranium, stick it in the soil and it would grow...' he said, meaning why don't *they* do it." There is a precision of visual description, in which subjectivity is uncomplicated but mostly suppressed, that is akin to that of Marianne

Moore.

The last two types of poems included in *Dwell* are those that expand the entire work into a dimensions that go beyond meanings that can be explored through prose-like sentences (even the twisted ones of "Phallic Coffee"). "Neighborhood" begins:

does seam meander
redundant anthropologist stigma
matters erst stinger
reverse severance cents
[sense of public outrage] generic sea-level
elements stunted desire
renovates set tension
on ontario ointment
["three of four expressed
a lack of confidence..."] centralizing
ignition notational lag garish shunts

Derksen skates over a variety of word-processes that produce and subvert meanings, occasionally breaking the stream with bracketed commentary that can't be called "sub-text" — it is not *under* anything — but radical transparencies that jars one out of the stream of it, or reconfigures the parameters of the stream so that it expands into further, more politicized, significances. There are shouts from the back room in this poem that brings the activity of the foreground, a sort of anagrammatic gene pool, to attention and hence elevates the entire project above the level of the "sense is sound" of jazz poetics. The final section of *Dwell*, "Temp Corp" — an allusion, one thinks, to another type of corporation that promises only a contractual imposition of social form, mostly on the young — is one that suffers most from critical abstraction, except that one might want to turn to Roland Barthes' description of Japanese (not English-language) haiku in *Empire of the Signs*, in which the brief poem is to obtain a "rightness" through the most undistinguished language. "Temp Corp" closes the poem, and yet it is by far the most spare, underpopulated section, a quality that is exaggerated by its placement after another long sub-poem in the manner of "Interface," called "If History Is the Memory of Time What Would Our Monument Be". These two poems, one opening and the other the penultimate, place "Temp Corp" outside a perimeter that is imaginatively arranged by the symmetric construction; it takes on, therefore, the sheen of superfluity, emphasizing Derksen's heteroglot poetics by not subsuming the remainder in the structure of the work. The

sections of "Temp Corps" — it is, again, a poem that seems constructed of shorter poems — are extremely brief, and use the space of the page as a formal element, a nest in which to support its ironies and significances. *Dwell* ends:

from the body

through the mind

via

One Unheard Liturgy

By Dan Featherston

Is it of such concern when what shall be
already is within the moonward sea?

—Olson, "The K,

Olson was right about not seeing the year 2000. He did not "stem straight" from his father's mother, and father time cut him down thirty years short. If he'd stemmed straight, we might have heard him "hang out some second story window / and sing ...one unheard liturgy." On the eve of the K, I wonder what Olson's "unheard liturgy" would have sounded like. What would Olson have made of the millennialists heading, for hills and bunkers? What would he have made of their fearful liturgies that the Y2K problem will push civilization back into the stone age? What would he have made of the masses slouching off to Bethlehem in hopes of witnessing the Second Coming?

The conquest and reconquest of space and time have always been big business. From the rim of the millennium, thousands of pilgrims hustle into the navel of the JudeoChristian universe to be among the first "last" people, a kind of reversal of Olson's "[w]e are the last 'first' people." The Israeli police, anticipating, the Second Coming, have organized a special Millennium Squad to deal with rabble-rousers like the Concerned Christians booted out of the Holy Land for plotting Armageddon. These first last people carry old maps with the Mediterranean as central sea, maps that Olson said "went overboard," along, with Columbus's Atlantic map, when Magellan discovered the Pacific. As Olson notes, "Homer was an end of the myth world from which the Mediterranean began. But in Ulysses he projected the archetype of the West to follow." Dante's map anticipates Columbus's Atlantic. The third and final map was Melville's (Magellan's) Pacific, "where West returned to East."

But these religious pilgrims have no use for literary archetypes of the West. They travel East. If there is an archetype of the West in the Judeo-Christian imagination, it is the return to Eden in the New Found

Land. A good candidate is the Mormon vision of Native Americans as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel: the West is a Lost East. Not new space but old time: history is the map. Peering into the Mediterranean navel, the Judeo-Christian map warps back on the East, skipping over the West. For Olson, the Y2K problem pushes us back way before 1900. The Second Coming returns us to the first, "last" people hemmed in by the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps Heraclitus was the only true prophet of time. With no Second Coming in sight, Olson's prophecy for the millennium still holds: "The affairs of men remain a chief concern".

Full circle.

What was Olson's "full circle"? What "tide" and what "moon"? In *Call Me Ishmael*, it is the Pacific rim and an "end of the UNKNOWN". In a century of two world wars, "the affairs of men" enter the imagination as global: all points, all instants "middleearth". The millenarian Christian's full circle ushers in an end to the Whore of Babylon, that protean avatar of evil interpreted through history as the Roman Church, the local magistrates, the US government Jews, Muslims, women, African Americans, money, taxes, gun-control lobbyists, and so on. Olson's full circle would usher in "an end to romans, hippocrats and christians," an "END of individual responsible only to himself." Olson left the forwarding address in "La Preface": "Buchenwald new Altamira cave". He pushed the human address back to the Paleolithic, forward to the Holocaust. The JudeoChristian address is not so specific: back door Eden, front door New Heaven & Earth. Judeo-Christian Revelation is transparency of the world: the house gone up in flames.

Olson's concerns were grounded in the body, the polis, and the "simpler" attention to "salts and minerals of the earth. . . . We are Antaeans: 'only in touch with the land and water of the earth do we keep our WEIGHT, retain POTENTIAL'. A taste for stones. Time, in Olson's hands, became material: Put away time, 'come into space.' His other Father, Melville, did not stem straight from *Moby Dick*, and followed the Christian obsession: Put away space, come into time. According to Olson, Melville's trip to the Holy Land gives up the ghost of Leviathan Space for what's sealed in the Christian

sepulcher of history's parenthetical closure. The tomb is empty, and the inscription reads:

"the dead bury the dead, and it is not very interesting."

Judeo-Christian eschatology is the undoing of time and space: an end

to history and its materials. It was the material of history Olson picked up from Melville and the Geist of 20th century America: "Document means. . . / no parenthesis." The Christian vision of history is a single document's linear march toward apocalypse. The Book encloses the world, not vice versa. Not the breaking of the seals, but rebinding history within a Christian narrative which carried its address forward this century to Buchenwald in the form of Fascism and mass extermination: Hitler's Reich was to reign for a thousand years, rhyming with the Christian millennium. At the core of 20th century totalitarianism, the totalizing view of religious eschatology. While new depths of human history open up at Altamira, Judeo-Christian space-time shuts down in Revelation as annihilation.

Judaism and Christianity are desert religions. Olson, like Melville before him, pushed past the Judeo-Christian vision of matter as all waste and wilderness, and looked back to Porphyry's clue that "the generation of images in the mind is from water." In Judeo-Christian mythology, water is chaos and terror, beginning in *Genesis* and the catalog of prohibited sea creatures in *Leviticus*. In Judeo-Christian mythology, the body is also terror and chaos, all waste and wilderness. To see God Jesus went away from polis to fast in the desert: if there is baptism, it is to bum up what moves like water in a man.

What moves like water in a man?

What is that "tide in a man / moves through him"? In Melville and Olson, water is gate and center, boundary and core. It is, like time, already moving in the moving man, "already within the moonward sea

Olson shifts prologue to the present. In Judeo-Christian eschatology, the past is prologue; or no-logue: Revelation as magically undoing all logos, all history's sad chronicling of the failure of eternity. For the Christian, eternity is always imminent, the present is dress rehearsal. Olson's present is the instant, "You, the cause":

... there is no such thing as duality either of the body and the soul or of the world and I, that fact in the human universe is the discharge of the many (the multiple) by the one (yrself done right, whatever you are, in whatever job, is the thing- all hierarchies, like dualities, are dead ducks).

In a recent discussion of Christianity in contemporary poetry, the poet Paul Mariani states, "Charles Olson was a poet who had been baptized a Catholic, but where in the poetry will one find a Catholic vision?" Mariani fails to see that Olson's vision swallowed up Catholic vision in the Maximus *Poems*. The Maximus Universe is to the Catholic Universe as Levia-

than is to guppy. Christian vision is bound by its own orthodoxy, handed down as Law of The Book. In the next millennium it is only by working into and against the grain of these traditions that a writer can truly address a Catholic Universe relevant to the full scope of what it means to be human, which now includes Altamira and Buchenwald. This is what Olson refers to as the "two live pasts":

your own ... and one other which we don't yet have the vocabulary for, because the West has stayed so ignorant, and the East has lived off the old fat too long. The western box is held together by the small scope of Judeo-Christian ideology that excludes these "two live pasts". The small "vocabulary" of so much contemporary American poetry reflects this binding constraint and obsession with "the old fat" of the East. Olson's vision begins with the vocabulary of two universes: the body as organism ("both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition") and the environment of the earth. Body and earth: Y2K, I can hear Olson's unheard liturgy, hanging out some window into the dawn of the new millennium:

It is undone business
I speak of, this morning,
with the sea
stretching, out
from my feet.

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