

# I. Contemporary U.S. Literature: A Collective Assessment\*

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## *Whithers and Whethers*

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Some twenty-five years ago or so, thanks to the first subsidies granted by a fledgling European community, a number of European research groups and individual researchers in contemporary American literature began meeting to study the latest developments in their field of inquiry. Over time, more informal contacts developed around the idea that Europe had something significant to contribute to the study of that area of knowledge.

Life has its ways with each one, “and time has its own,” and, as a number of founding scholars moved away, younger colleagues joined forces with the protean groups that kept trying to keep track of the evolution of the American literary imagination.

In France alone, the original research team led by André Le Vot at Paris III first turned into the “Groupe René Tadlov” at the Parisian “Maison des Sciences de l’Homme,” then into the “Laboratoire Orléans-Tours de Littérature Américaine” (LOLitA). The latter group kept up its activities under the guidance of Thomas Pughe as I moved away again to found the Observatoire de Littérature Américaine at the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay/ St. Cloud and I am now in the process of installing it again within the walls of the University of Paris VII-Denis Diderot.

All that time, our paramount activity consisted not only in keeping up with recent American literary developments (mostly in fiction) but also in an attempt at discovering younger or less popular writers that our American colleagues, for institutional reasons of their own, tended to ignore or study less than their better-known fellow-novelists.

As an incredibly rich literary period in American literature seemed not to close with but accompany the turn of the new century, I thought it fit to organize, in May 1997, in collaboration with my LOLitA friends, a three-day colloquium at the École Normale Supérieure, drawing on decades of friendships with critics and writers alike, to try and assess the nature of the moment, the situation of writing in America.

Need I say the task was impossible, in spite of the good will, competence and energy of all those concerned? A daunting literary corpus, an immense variety and the following basic aporia necessarily doomed the enterprise and demanded that we read what success it could be in the anti-heroic light of American failed heroes. Because, indeed, studying literary historical developments in the present tense does amount, by definition, to an aporia. It is extremely difficult to judge “on the spot,” so to speak, the tribulations of a national literature and to decide what will matter “in the end.” And there is no “progress” either, as Claude Simon so admirably demonstrated in his Nobel Prize address, in the world of art.

Debating the state of present literature basically revolves around and tears us between a set of “whethers” and a set of “whithers.” The “whithers” lurk behind any question investigating the “directions,” be they “new,” that literature is taking. They also lurk behind any speculation on where these “new” forms come from. The “whethers” necessarily strew our discourse as soon as we hesitate between sets of potential directions literature might seem to be taking. In spite of the delightful sophistry of a famous American saying—“When you come to a fork in the road, take it!”—, we all know choices between types of aesthetics are tempting, at the same time as we know that the literary situation at any given time accommodates the cohabitation of perfectly different or even contradictory modes, modes whose very tension generates the dynamics of change. To a certain extent, the present is that form of time in which, indeed, “whither” equals “whether,” or at least, depends upon the answers we give to a set of “whethers.” Over the last thirty or forty years only, a number of directions emerged before they seemed to merge. The dialogue of forms is unceasing and we were happy, on the occasion of this “literary Iliad,” to bring together writers belonging to distinct generations, having no doubt that the relativization the longer view affords would allow us not to succumb to the blunt oracles of the crystal ball.

This being said, old habits die hard and the most pressing urge we felt was to give voice to literary endeavors that placed a premium on aesthetic proposals rather than to what critical parlance would encourage to call “les littératures de contenu.” Because “la littérature de langue,” as Michel Chaillou would put it—in a way that is only apparently redundant—, was always in the forefront of our investigations, it seemed to go of itself that no hard line would be drawn between fiction and poetry; not only because

both literary genres had something to tell us, but also because the line that separates them grows as hazy and flimsy in some fictional productions as it does in poetical others. But we definitely and deliberately chose to place the emphasis on modes of writing that tend neither to be the most taught or explored in American Universities today nor the most widely read by the general public.

The debates we enjoyed for two days will not be found transcribed here. Much rather, several participants were asked to develop their contribution and the reader will only find here the most general, least topical papers they were kind enough to send after the event. The emphasis, in order to constitute a coherent small ensemble, had to fall on considerations that did not have to do too precisely with individual authors or works. Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, not all the very good papers we heard could find their place in this dossier. I would like in particular to thank Robert Coover, Maria Lozano, Bradford Morrow, Zoltan Abadi-Nagy, Jerome Charyn, Hartwig Isernhagen and Heinz Ickstadt for their invaluable part in the conference—even though their contributions appeared or will appear elsewhere—, and to express my gratitude to the collective of French colleagues who chaired the sessions and saw to it that the debates were rich and orderly.

And finally, I would like to express the gratitude and pride I feel towards the authors and critics that appear in the following pages. Not the least of whom are the editors of this journal, whose hard work and generosity made it possible to share some moments of a meeting whose keywords were, most emphatically, friendship and conviviality.

Special issues of various journals, over the years, have been dedicated to ongoing French research on contemporary American fiction, from *Europe* and the *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* to *Bas de Casse* and *Le Magazine Littéraire*, to name only a few. This issue of *Sources* will, I believe, be a central element in this series, enriched and diversified by the work of our foreign friends and colleagues. And then, of course, the work goes on. And who knows where our collective cuckoo will next lay its eggs?

## *The Futures of Fictions*

WILLIAM GASS\*

1. The novel to come will be, as it has always been, whatever novelists of genius make it, and what they will make it is quite unpredictable. Who could have foreseen the flowering of Irish writing during the early part of this century? Suddenly Austrian literature has a Thomas Bernhard, and then, just as suddenly, it hasn't. Or Italy boasts a Pavese, or a Gadda, or a Levi, or an Italo Calvino. Can we really say who it will be able to be proud of next?

2. The continued existence of Writing Programs in the United States and their dubious spread, like coke and jeans, to Canada and Latin America, the dominance of a commercial culture with its constant creation of, and pandering to, new markets, will both extol mediocrity and extend its influence.

a. I have noticed (again in writing programs) an increasing indifference of poets to prose writers and vice versa. In the first decades of this century, Eliot, Yeats, and Pound, for example, were an important influence on prose writers. Now the twain rarely meet.

i) As American poetry exhaled, and declined from its great peak and became more and more local, plain, and self-absorbed, fiction writers became more experimental, more ambitious, more baroque. There isn't an American poet now whose language can reach the levels of eloquence one regularly finds in Elkin, Coover, Hawkes, Gaddis, or West, and only a few are investigating the medium with the profundity of Barth or Abish or the already named.

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ii) During the modernist period, the leading critics were poets (principally), and the rapport between poetry and the New Criticism was close. The new critics taught a generation how to read. Empson, Warren, Ransom, Tate, Jarrell, were studied by everybody. And Marxism was a force. The present antagonism between poetry and Critical Theory (as it is absurdly called), as well as Gay and Feminist oriented critics, approaches total war on the critical side and profound indifference on the other. At present, most critics are the captives of their sexual, religious, ethnic, and political opinions from which they hang suspended like a pair of dressy pants.

b. Money corrupts and much money corrupts muchly. More and more, writing programs are establishing ties with the publishing world and aiming their students at New York. It is not the skills of the teachers which draw students to them, but their power of influence.

c. There will be more people than ever trying to remain alive on our planet; there will therefore be more books of every kind, and it will be increasingly difficult for anyone to find excellence among the garbage cramming our mindfills. Moreover, journalists, critics, and academicians, will participate in the elevation of the culturally harmless to positions of praise. Intellectual fads will exercise inadequate minds and give groups solace and solidity. It will be bad form to support any sort of standards, and those who believe in meeting the highest demands of their art will be increasingly scorned or ignored and isolated. This will be good for them.

3. It is the writers who live in the short run who will naturally comprise and determine the predictable short term trends.

a. It does seem reasonable to suppose that new technologies would offer a natural purchase for prediction. Publishing, for instance, is likely to become fragmented and dispersed, and the physical character of the book will probably undergo rather radical changes. It is also a good bet that such technologies will allow more and more people to participate in pseudo-cultural activities, enlarging the audience which it flatters with facility and instructs through inanity.

b. However, even these predictions (that we shall have more of the same) are problematic.

i) Who might have imagined that the motor car would become one of the chief enemies of man, even as it made all drivers equal and equally dangerous: scarring the land, polluting the air and rivers, consuming natural resources, destroying the urban integrity of cities by encouraging the growth of ringworm-resembling suburbs, and killing and maiming millions more than our wars.

ii) Or who would have believed that most technology would have such an anti-communal effect, allowing us to live in thermos bottles, and to communicate rapidly and easily but always at a comfortable and indifferent distance.

iii) Even the book itself, as an invention, in helping to create the highly individual modern mind (although most of the world is manifestly not yet modern), acts to transfer a writer's private activity into the privacy of the reader's consciousness. Everyone in the reading room of the library is busy with their book's thoughts or their own, and its loudest sign says "Hush!"

4. Although the world is presently being pulled apart by petty tribalisms, bullying braggadocio, and intolerant superstitions, and although linguistic chauvinism and local injustice and just rage will promote the parochial, and even energize much writing, the necessities of human survival, the need for more human unity, the continued pressures of commercial markets, and the abilities of technologies to produce the illusions of contact, will thrust internationalism upon all who would wish to flourish—whatever "internationalism" or "flourish" will come to mean.

a. At the same time, I see no reason why serious writers won't continue to be marginal, and politically and socially ineffective (though our numbers will naturally increase along with the general human population). Disasters which may alter everything... well, they *may* alter everything. Many loom, but which catastrophe will fall upon us first is not easy to predict, nor are all the consequences. Today's calamities are often tomorrow's boons, and vice versa.

b. Writers will still be in demand by the Establishment: to supply banalities to an enlarging and insatiable consumer culture, to flatter the half-educated that they are wholly so, and to sand rough lies smooth as the creamiest peanut butter that ever stuck to the roof of a politician's mouth.

c. And the tribes, who will want writers to compose propaganda for them so they may retain their petty and inconsequential identities, will value us. They will need us to hide their inadequacies and to give tongue to their rage. But the work they will want will be strident, one-sided, mimetic, and as old-fashioned as the hand gun.

i) Yet American Literature has been made mostly by minorities, immigrants, from its inception. The steady infusion of new cultures, new beliefs, new vibrancies, has been our greatest strength. Not only are Afro-American writers exerting an influence they never had before, really fine things are coming out of the Hispanic communities, the Asian, and the Pakistani and Indian enclaves. They do not write about adulteries and other sorts of entertainment to be found around Connecticut swimming pools. Just as the finest English writing is Colonial or Commonwealth, our best may shortly have an Asian or a Latin flavor.

d. The mob has always preferred simulation and spectacle, sex and scandal. In our culture, the mob has more money than it has ever had, and therefore more influence. We will get more simulation and more spectacle

as a consequence. I envision the future providing each of us with a little cell whose walls, floor, and ceiling are screens on which any scene we like may be flashed—women whose backs I can seem to walk upon, to my left a view up and down a famous avenue, to my right (as I put my foot down upon a pillowesque breast) the simulated sinking of the Titanic, in front of me the ruins of the Acropolis in the moonlight, behind me a program on venereal disease, in the skies a dogfight from the first world war; while, as a part of the room's modish furniture, machines which will provide sex and games and movies, liquor will be necessary, as well as perfumed air, cocaine, and pre-chewed food.

5. In the past, critics and journalists have enjoyed corraling writers into schools, trends, and movements, and these, along with their "isty" names (futurist, symbolist, minimalist, nativist), deployed like battalions, have created the impression of cultural force or literary movement, inclination and direction.

a. Often, when we look at these collections closely, what holds them together becomes mysteriously opaque. The differences between Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner are greater and more important than their similarities—that they were all drunks being the most obvious one—and the same may be said, I think, of those poor post-modern metafictionists (Barth, Hawkes, Coover, Gaddis, Abish) or the so-called sour Jewish jokers (Malamud, Roth, Elkin, Bellow), since none of these writers writes like any of the others, and their pages are immediately identifiable as theirs. What sort of schools are these, made out of groupers, whales, ocotopi, and sharks?

b. In this regard, Paul Valéry, as usual, had something sensible to say. Making the same observation about the movement called "symbolist" that I've just made about these ill-assorted Americans, he nevertheless found where the glue had been applied. They had different skills, aims, styles, personalities, interests, but they were all opposed to the same things: they had in common their enemies. Given that principle, I should move Elkin onto the list with Barth and Gaddis, and add West. These are writers who came out of the sixties and shared many qualities with the Latin-American writers of the same decade whom they much admired.

c. There are two kinds of aunties, just as there are two kinds of uncles. The beat writers were also "anti" but their opposition was social and cultural, first of all, and artistic only secondarily. Furthermore, they did share a common style, and actually promoted their own label. They were "in the public eye artists" like Capote and Mailer, and were therefore able to make their indiscernible talents nonetheless audible. Many were gay, and their kind of alienation was therefore very unlike that felt by a writer like Gaddis, for instance.

d. If aunties are often fanciful and abundant, uncles are realists. Minimalists did write alike. It was hard to tell them apart. Their aims were as minimal as their achievements. They poured out of writing programs, and specialized in short bursts (which the format of workshops naturally encourages). But they weren't groupies and had no public persona or agenda.

e. The other uncle is the traditional realist, who may allegorize a bit, but only with pieces of actual life, who experiments a little, but whose novels resemble the traditional ones for the most part (Bellow, Malamud, Updike, some of the time, Roth).

6. The 19th century novelist, feeling his or herself in the center of things, might move with the narrative tide, and think seriously of using the novel for social reform; but one of the worst centuries in the world's history stands between that writer and the novelist of the 21st century. The latter writer will have to represent "a counterlife."

a. If, as I believe, language remains at the center of human thought and intelligence, and is humanity's principal connective tissue, then, as people read less, speak less, write less to one another (E-Mail is not written, it is emitted, like farts after a big meal), the odd result will be that only those who read and write well will be able to distinguish significant facts from our deluge of data; only they will have some understanding of history and the foul nature of human nature; only they will be able to outthink the machine. Only they will be able to anticipate what a set-back the next technological advance may actually be. Reading and writing will be more important than ever.

b. Computerization will tend to terse up or "wireless" language on the one hand, and loosen it up toward talk on the other. Writers will have to react and oppose this movement by making the written language more and more important to them rather than less so. Collage pieces (Caponegro, Metcalf) rely on language already formed. The spacialization of texts can be expected to continue. The interior of syntactic structures, the physicality of the medium, layout, and so on, will remain important to writers interested in advancing the art. Linguistics is still in its infancy.

c. Science would be as impotent as poetry if it weren't in the pay of technology, because technology produces products the public will spend anything to possess. Science can be expected to continue to push us on into the future, with technological advances empowering it; but those of us who happen right now to infest our planet are not living in the same times. Some lives are lived in a medieval mode, some are at the beginning of the industrial civilization, a few have been in the 21st century for quite a while. This imbalance seems to me to be the greatest threat of all. "Nature must be made to go as far as the mind goes," Gaston Bachelard said. The trouble is, neither man nor nature wanna.

d. Every legitimate new form will be the produce of science and mathematics, and anyone who wishes to “Keep Up” will have to know much more about these rulers of the new world than they presently do. The Periodic Table provided Primo Levi with a great shape, as spirals helped Calvino arrange his invisible cities. A collection of stories like Joanna Scott’s delightful book, “Various Antidotes,” Steven Millhauser’s wonderful work, or Mary Caponegro’s collage pieces, reassure me that there are writers in age right behind me, who are, as they should be, ahead of me in innovation and imagination. But what are these antidotes? They help us “get over and out” of life. Millhauser’s cartoonist, Joanna Scott’s lens grinder, disappear into their obsessions—into their art, their science.

e. Just as we’ve always done.

## *Stray Thoughts on American Writing in the Age of Pleonastic Reproduction*

PATRICK O'DONNELL\*

*For Stanley Elkin*

The elided word in the announced subtitle of this colloquium (“trials,” as in “The Trials and Tribulations of American Literature Toward the New Millennium”) is an interesting erasure, particularly given the current American obsession with trials: the aftermath of O.J. sporadically returns in the teeth of the Oklahoma Bombing trial’s beginning; we will become as familiar with the intimate details of Timothy McVeigh’s life over the next twelvemonth as we have with those of Brothers Menendez, the curtailed Mr. Bobbitt (now a porn star in such films as *Frankenpenis*), the Joey Buttafuco of echoey name and, apparently, complete endowment. To the fetishes of bloody glove and athletic shoe, to the grainy photographs of dead and mutilated bodies, there will be added new mounds of evidence—inevitably tainted, lost, misread—to mull over *ad nauseam*. In America at the end of the millenium, we never know what new trials and tribulations await us—what fallout from future celebrity murders, the next comet cult, the next FBI fiasco, each bearing its magical, oddly fateful name: Ruby Ridge (Jack Ruby? Dorothy’s slippers?) Waco (our whacko wake-up call), Hale-Bopp (a jazzy interpellation), the Unabomber (one nation under

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anarchy). What we do know is that there will be more as the peculiar, paranoiac panic culture of the United States chaotically steers its way toward the millenium, projecting who knows what narrative paths through the onslaught of what passes for history now in the instantaneous sequencing of the contingent.

We are obsessed with trials and tribulations because as sheer process they dramatize the unpredictable, polysemous, ongoingness of things—“wonderful life,” as Stephen Jay Gould terms it—but framed by some narrative structure, positioned within some larger episodic story that allows us to see the connections between all of the disparate nutty surprises of contemporary existence; we desire historical extravagance (and extravagance), but accompanied by the side dish of paranoid explanation; we want the twist, but we also want the spin; we want both the surprise witness and the frame-up; we bookmark our rhizomic navigations of the Net. If this is something of an old story—after all, the Puritans were both fascinated by their alien circumstances, beyond the predictable and the known, yet drawn to paranoia in the displacements of uncertainty’s power onto barbaric natives and unruly women—it is a story whose sheer, breathtaking inventiveness continues to surprise us in the vacuous, cute meet between history and what’s happening now.

In another register, we seem to be at a moment when mutability—present in the plethora of aliens, nomads, cyborgs, psychos, and shape-changers of the current imaginary—is paired up with the desire for process and seriality in the ongoing cultural narrative that reveals the necessity for all of this splayed and endless metonymy to come to some metaphoric end. What the evidence suggests to me is that we are witnessing in these contemporary trials and tribulations something of a knockdown dragout, settling down, at times, into a teary conversation, between the hypervisible and language, between what Robert Coover, blurbing Stephen Wright’s terrific novel, *Going Native*, calls “the monster image feed” and those expressive language forms, those words and sentences, that generate a metaphorical and, therefore, weighty, corporeal, image-caught bearing to the real. The question at this point seems to be: have the strains of this relation between language and image—more precisely, certain forms of visuality—under the reign of the hypervisible been so profound that the couple is virtually on the rocks? Coover himself has been staging this matrimonial struggle throughout his work, as did Stanley Elkin, as does William Gass. As different as their work is in essential ways, they commonly and extraordinarily insist on language’s metaphoric—which is to say, its imagistic—power drained away by what can only be unattractively termed the metonymization of the image when its visibility is rendered in terms of its elusive, connective qualities, its evacuation of self-reference in favor of a prolepsis, its kinetic notation of what comes next, shadowed by

the always-vanished present instant. None of these three is simply satisfied to referee the bout: they are partisans in the struggle to preserve the radicality of language, which is, precisely, its capacity both to keep in flux and stabilize the relation between word and image, thereby preserving both, saved only by virtue of that relation, within the aura of particular history.

Here is Elkin, for example, in *The Franchiser*. Listen:

*I drive the road. I go up and down it. I stay in motels and watch the local eyewitness news at ten. Murders are done, town councils don't know what to do about porno flicks, everywhere the cops have blue flu, farmers nose-dive from threshers, supply and demand don't work the way they used to, and even our President's at a loss and his advisers divided. The left hand don't know what the right hand is doing and only the weather report touches us all. The time and the temperature. What we have left for community. Only that. The barometer adjusted to sea level, the heat wave, the drought, the cold front stalled over Wisconsin, today's low and it's the record. And the fuss that's made! My God, the fuss that's made and only because it's what the local eyewitness news thinks holds us together. Some view of us it has, pals. As if we lived the wind under the same umbrella. I see this. City after city and state after state. . . . We should take over the stations and put out the real news. For everyone murdered a million unscathed, for every fallen farmer so many upright. We would put it out. Bulletin: Prisoners use sugar in their coffee! Do you see the sweet significance. We argue the death penalty and even convicts eat dessert. . . . The state's bark is always worse than its bite, brothers, and goodness is living in the pores of the System, and Convenience. . . . Nobody, nobody, nobody ever had it so good. Take heed. A franchiser tells you.*

Against the images of the weather's endless stationary fronts, viewed from the satellite, produced by the "local eyewitness news" (it is generally true that in a local tv news broadcast of 22 airtime minutes, about eight are devoted to the weather and ten to sports, leaving 360 seconds for everything else), Elkin comically posits an alternative system of communication in which the quotidian of the image-event is caught in a linguistic solution that is invested in the sweet significance of particularity borrowing upon a metaphoric commonality as it settles into the cracks and fissures of the generalized real.

Elkin's love for the particular, the specific, his insistence that "what holds us together" is an array of differentials and unseen commonalities that cannot be framed *ad seriatim* within the general story of the weather—told the same way, even if the content varies slightly, whether you are in Sioux Falls or Tallahassee—offers a resistance to the tyranny of information and image, the monster image feed plus language, that constitutes the metonymies of the news. Metaphor labors to burrow into the discrete image, to take the measure of its grain before worrying its

connectivity; it is this linguistic burrowing that characterizes, for example, Gass's work, which ever privileges particularity above pattern. In *The Tunnel*, the historian, Kohler, meditates on the advance of mortality on "some supremely ordinary Sunday afternoon,"

*... through which I sometimes raked the yard or burned the leaves without once considering the nature of loss, grief, loneliness, or even invoking the poetry of change. In fact, despite my mood, I rather enjoyed the deep red flakes of fire the leaves became, the blue smoke too, like an Indian signal, although my head was clogged with the certainty, as if I'd come down with a cold, that everything would soon be over, that the open hours ahead of me were closing like a store; my free and undemanding time was passing as unboarded as a train; or that pure, uncomplicated play—my movie, my ballgame, picnic, the Wild West I had daydreamed, the robbery of a train—or the sweet world of wish and rich invention—was coming to an end as every holiday does, and ending emptily too—pushed out with a grunt like the last stool; and, of course, this conviction ate at life's advancing edge the way a worm gnaws at a leaf; it shriveled the imagination like a frightened penis; for what could one hope to catch and keep of life with such a weakened net, or forlorn fling? So one suffered through one's forties every seventh day, and became an accountant, as I have done, in self-defense: weighing the light lick the tongue first gave the cone, the cunt, the honey spoon, the licorice stick, against the envelope it wet, the postage stamp, dry nervous lips; measuring a few great words read right against the accumulated weight of the wishy-washy, of tons of trivia and tedium, of Nothing itself—the melancholy experience of pure durée.*

To the trials and tribulations I've mentioned we might add Kohler's trivia and tedium which are mere stand-ins for nothingness, the forestalling of death, which threaten to envelop the sweet world of wish and invention in all of its atomized particularity like the cloud cover of contamination after nuclear holocaust. One reads this passage not just as Kohler's own Stevensian plaint, but as Gass's statement about the plight of the writer in the age of hypervisuality and millennial information overload, this age of trials. In the double logic of Gass's metaphoric prose, for the historian, what forestalls the forestalling of death and nothingness, and thus preserves our mortality in all of its facticity and clarity, is that magic marker of the real's first giving, the particular and discrete language of signals, first licks, objects, and the few great words read right. If the metonymy of trials, tribulations, the news and the weather is the beard of nothingness, then metaphor is the preservation, like a fly in amber, of the particular real before it, which is our only history.

This seems a crucial point at a moment, once again, when mutability is paired off with positionality—a hapless coupling that, had I time, I would explicitly argue subtends any number of unfortunate contemporary trajectories: political correctness, paranoia, naïve visuality, some forms of

so-called cultural critique, some reductive postmodernisms, historicist vacuity, bad pragmatism, bad categorization, bad weather (we have to blame it on something after all), and a lot of bad writing. Two related elements that may lie at the bottom of these related sins, Kohler suggests, are terror and temporality, or more precisely, a terror of temporality, terror at the sting of particular experience, its linguistic evanescence, its non-iterability, its singularity and oneness, its inevitable passing away into time. Gass, and Coover, and Elkin, and a few others we might name in a disturbingly short list as we approach the end of contemporary American writing at the end of the millenium, register this metaphorical smart, a conceit by means of which that contact with the real we call "experience" is preserved both as invention and loss: this, I take it, is also the point of Coover's most recent parable in *Briar Rose*. To return to the scene of the crime and the scene of the trial: all of the overcoded, overdetermined, contaminated evidence—the DNA test, the blood samples, the paused and rerun videotapes, the photographs, blown up, filtered, arranged, the contradictory testimony—all of this multiplicitous, pleonastic information adds up to the fact that we have missed something in the plenum, and that we might do well now, as always, to cast aside our theories and take the measure of a few great words read right.

## *Deafness, Prayer and the Irrational*

BEN MARCUS\*

1) I aim here to discuss three topics, deafness, prayer, and the Irrational, that I feel to be bound up with the act of writing, the apparent future of language, and deliberations concerning the direction of the art. In examining these topics, I will purposefully pursue the errors that have accrued in their name, rather than the facts that are available to anyone, under the belief that there is much poetical depth and satisfaction in what is wrong, flawed or incorrect. Deafness, prayer and the Irrational are fields of inquiry, after all, as well as conditions and actions, and have their secret register of failed ideas. Certainly what is accurate or known has already had its day and has only so much to tell us. I believe, on the other hand, in the beauty of error, even if willful, and will strain to accommodate the outrageous or unknown if it will clarify or decimate the spectacle that has us under its spell. A history of wrong ideas might be precisely the perspective needed to jar writing into new and necessary territory.

2) *How To Kill Language Once And For All By Learning To Pray With Objects Rather Than Words*

When it is remarked that language is nearly finished; its permutations exhausted; its ability to incept new shapes and motions into the atmosphere seriously compromised; its effect on younger, more visually oriented cultures just about nil; it still seems clear that, whether or not these warnings have any merit, visual approaches to the artistic transmission

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have yet to yield any act that approximates prayer. Language remains the primary means of addressing the Almighty, of formulating desire and directing it toward a conceived origin. It is this strength that language artists have perhaps neglected, choosing instead to compete with the seductions and entrapments of light and its dismal variations, a competition that cannot be won.

If a future of language must be discussed, then that future should be considered elementally religious, for it is the only domain that language does not share with another medium. Prayer is not yet conducted with the hands. Practitioners of sign language do not, for example, sign to themselves when they are alone, nor do they feel, apparently, that their hands can be seen by God. And although it exists in fiction, we have yet to devise an actual sky film, to be projected against the highest register of air and signal something of the heart into the void. It is perhaps a shortcoming of film that it has not projected spectacles onto the elements in order to alter and supplement our relationship with the weather or (another name for it) God.

When we strike a posture of prayer toward an imagined almighty, we believe we can be heard but not seen. The formality of the prayer position—the pressed hands, the lowered chin, the cup tied to the belt—seems more for the benefit of other worshipers, a modest position conducive to achieving clarity of prayer. But we do not produce musical tones for His regard. Music is not directed purposefully to heaven, nor would it be trusted that the meaning were clear, that melodic sound can accomplish the primary function of individual prayer. And for all of the so-called successes of pantomime, including the Women's Pantomime movement, which suggested a separate, non-purposeful code of gestures for women, a private behavior not designed to accomplish anything but singular movement within the void, a specifically religious semaphore has yet to be devised. The questions remain: How can the body be contorted in a manner that God might notice? Is there a fundamental religious gymnastics that might achieve the credence of the language prayer? Can a new athletics be devised that attempts to refine this religious signaling?

Dance comes to mind, and has its share of adherents, who swear that something important occurs during public, rhythmic motion. But when is dance configured for precise messaging? When is it ever choreographed for topographical viewing? Or who, finally, would trust their prayer to systems of the body?

Certainly, though, a gestural subset has arisen in relation to prayer. We "cross" ourselves, a book is kissed, cloth is held to the mouth. A man stamps on a bulb of glass. A serpent is passed near the eyes. But these acts lack any grammar. They are not meant to, nor are they capable of, articulating anything personal toward the exclusive audience, something

we think God might need to know. If there were a way to “sign” to God, a method people believed had utility, then we would see hordes of worshipers on mountains sending their gestures toward the sun.

If these techniques are devised, and followed, language will have no exclusive use. For now, it is language alone that allows for the basic religious transaction and no amount of technology seems relevant when it comes to God.

There has been seen, it should be mentioned, a brief American signing movement, characteristically unnamed but sometimes referred to as Sign Language for Large Hands, that attempted to construct gestures best viewed at a distance, passes of the hand thought to have an atmospheric effect, finger skills meant to only articulate what is sacred. It is a specialized language difficult to master, which explains its failure as prayer. Skilled practitioners of this signing method, ironically, develop hands so contorted by the strange exercises that they become capable of nothing but this attempted visual prayer. They lose all sensitivity in their hands and can no longer manipulate tools. The ability to pray, as Meister Eckhart reminds us, should not have to be taught. It is an innate need that the body finds on its own and should not require the use of obscure muscles in the hands.

Conclusionary Statement: In the future, language will be reserved for religious transmissions.

Storytelling, or diversion, will be achieved exclusively with light. Light will literally erode language. Writing and speech, not to mention prayer, will be conducted in the dark.

Irony: In using language, we seek light. In using light, language is lost, compromised.

Apology: It might not be true, might only serve my own ends, might be a provocative lie.

The Truth: I would rather lie if it prevented boredom.

### *3) Incorrect Theories of Deafness Posited in Early Times and How They Relate to Contemporary Writing and Language*

An errant theory of deafness from the encyclopedia of silence suggested that the deaf body, rather than being impervious to sound, stored it on its surface. The sound was thought not to dissipate, but to collect on the skin, in the hair, against the face. As a result, deaf figures were seen as potential frequency transmitters, vessels that could carry sound to remote regions beyond the typical means of broadcast. They could smuggle sound either to remove it from a territory, to cleanse that space of acoustical fragments, or to deliver it elsewhere, an area perhaps where certain sounds had previously been thought impossible. It was not considered secure to speak in the presence of the Deaf, nor to moan or

hum or sing, lest their bodies were “recording” the vocalizations with the intention of revealing them elsewhere.

The flawed theory emerged out of the notion that the act of hearing removed a sound from the atmosphere and stored it in the head, a mildly crude version of what actually happens. Several questions arise out of the error: Why couldn't the body be storing the sounds it had received, and if it was, what sort of playback systems could be devised in order to release the information from the deaf body? In other words, how to extract a message stored within a deaf figure?

Fire is considered first, of course, because fire, in early America, is also referred to as Release. Thus we have certain ready-made metaphors: the burning body, the blaze that produces speech, a fire before language can exist. But the fire is real fire, and to Release a body is to demolish what occurs within it, no matter what is rescued as a result. Heat, interestingly, when great enough, does produce acoustical events that approximate language, and the process of combustion cannot be separated from what happens in the brain when language occurs. Recordings of fire have been studied not only by theorists of sound, as would be expected, but by linguists, and combustion itself is determined to have its own grammar and syntax, acoustical rules that vary according to what is being burned. It was only ever an idea, but it questioned whether the deaf body, if put to cinder, would avail itself of a final report, some sound string that might prove crucial to religious notions so futilely left to techniques of reason. Could religious contact, for example, have been attempted onto the skin of these figures, an act so extreme that their hearing was scorched?

Another event indicates that “Hearing Devices” placed in a room were thought to swallow noise and thus render a silent space. Enough deaf figures, known to absorb nearly twice the sound of a hearing person, strategically placed, could strip an area of sound, could silence it. In the early years of radio, deaf figures were placed in a field between transmitter and receiver to block the message and did so successfully, but died in the process, literally burst open with sound.

Deafness is briefly, in the 14th century, considered the highest state of being, a virtue only rarely accorded but widely worshipped, given that it freed the figure from acknowledging the shallow sounds of the lower world. A primary religious act of this time, not coincidentally, is the act of listening, and religious listeners are employed by the Catholic church to listen for a signal from above. In America we see listening cults that require absolute silence from their surroundings, in order that they might hear something “else,” if there is anything else. The Listening Group, operating out of Colorado, proposes that the skins of deaf figures be collected and monitored with microphones.

Note: These theories are no less interesting to me because they are untrue. In a way they are more interesting, not only because they are less familiar than the typical, available field of knowledge, but because their errors have yet to be absorbed and diluted by the various machines that ruin whatever is known by personalizing, psychologizing, or disarming it. Distortions of the factual body lend promise, at any rate, to the future, our ostensible subject here. Truth is possible with information of any kind, wrong or dead or true, that has not yet been mauled by the official filters.

Meaning, to my view, is not in the so-called physical world, but in the language we throw at it. Conventions of speech and thought encourage a severely limited way of regarding the world and its properties, and consequently determine what we consider rational. Fictions can attack what is arbitrary or loosely installed in the language, and by asserting fictions onto fields of inquiry that are dead from too much truth, a renewed vision can be achieved, a set of ripples that disturb the air enough to cause some life.

Last note: Language creates new facts. It is a system that can be manipulated, through techniques of rhetoric and authority, to create what might be considered new truths. And just as one form of rhetorical authority can create the semblance of factual truth, the opposite is also possible: fiction—or the strategic use of language—can make so-called true things false. This is more interesting to me, to take “facts” out of the world and destroy them. In a certain sense it is the opposite of making fiction: clearing the culture of useless or dead information to make room for more suggestive notions of how the world operates.

# *The Broken Line: Hypertexts as Labyrinths*

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Since their very beginning, hypertexts have been identified with labyrinths. In literary discussions, for instance, their association is rampant. One general introduction is aptly entitled *Hypertext. The Electronic Labyrinth* (Snyder 1996). Other titles question: “Is There a Reader in this Labyrinth?” (Douglas 1992); offer advice on “The Art of Navigating Through Hypertext” (Nielsen 1990); or wonder what it means to be “Wandering Through the Labyrinth” (Douglas 1989). One title even bridges the gap between hypertexts and J.L.Borges’ “The Garden of Forking Paths,” another well-known labyrinth (Moulthrop 1991).

The similarity between the two is also noted on the Internet where a large number of commercial hypertexts are disguised as labyrinths, with walls and alleys full of turns and dead ends, and a Minotaur waiting in a central room. There is even a web site devoted to the study of hypertexts, entitled “The Electronic Labyrinth” (University of Alberta). Hypertexts, however, are not the only objects to be declared labyrinthine, for almost anything, nowadays, that has a mazelike complexity, which seems to be inextricable and a source of confusion, will thus be described. Numerous titles use the term “labyrinth” to mark the complexity of their subjects, from sicknesses, such as Alzheimer’s disease, phobias, environmental illness and the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, to government and its red tape, either local or foreign, as well as international policies, love affairs,

sexuality, Jungian theory, religious traditions, Eisenstein's cinema, Gogol's art, architecture, exile, and even the history of writing and letters<sup>1</sup>. The labyrinth has imposed itself as the perfect metaphor to describe both the complexity of a problem and the process of freeing oneself from its grasp, the bewilderment or perplexity of its experience and the quest for its center, which leads to knowledge, extrication and, ultimately, transcendence.

This analogy, however, is often ephemeral. The labyrinth, as a metaphor, is a conceptual aid, abandoned as soon as its significance has been established. Once the complexity of the experience has been foregrounded, there is nothing else to say and the analogy vanishes. In Snyder's introduction, for instance, we read that: "Another common metaphor is that of the maze or labyrinth." (1996: 37) John Barth's definition is rapidly called forth, as well as Borges's version of the infinite labyrinth with its forking paths, which is said to be: "a potent metaphor for our pursuit of knowledge in the vastness of hypertext: an active, exhilarating, if somewhat frustrating endeavour" (1996: 38). And then we move on to more serious matters, such as reconceiving textuality (chap. 3), reading and writing (chap. 4), narrative (chap. 5), teaching, learning and the curriculum (chap. 6). The metaphor has served as a ground, embodying "the understanding of hypertext central to [her] book" (1996:38), and is then simply discarded like a used cartridge.

My path will be different here, for I want to investigate further the relationship between fictional hypertexts and labyrinths. My claim is that they share many formal features, features that help us better understand the possibilities and limits of this new form of fiction. Hypertexts interest me not so much in their writing and production, than in their reading and understanding. What does it mean to navigate through these computer-based forms? What are the consequences of hypertexts having no definite beginning nor end? Of having supposedly no fixed order nor closure, conceived of as suspect qualities? What happens to stories and narrative structures, when linearity and sequentiality are no longer the basis of their organization? My argument will be that hypertexts, in much the same way as labyrinths, have complex multicursal patterns, which make them prisons as well as works of art. And for both their experience to be more than an endless and aimless wandering, in a maze of walls and words as well as thoughts, they require some form of closure (Brooks 1985). The labyrinth is the perfect ground for the play of musement, for a *rêverie*, essential perhaps to the imagination and creativity, but only as long as its course can be completed. So I will argue that closure is not a suspect quality, the way some writers and critics of hypertexts do right now, but an essential feature.

## Hypertexts and Labyrinths

For some critics, hypertextuality is the opening of a third dimension in language (Bernard 1993), a cultural revolution, arising as the late age of print gives way to an era of videosigns and cybersigns. It is a mark of progress. Its medium is not the book and its pages, but the computer and its screen. Hypertexts exist only as an electric impulse: their form requires a word processor capable of linking fragments of text together, called knots, and sometimes even images and sounds, as in hypermedia productions. They can be loaded from a disk or downloaded from the Internet, but they cannot leave the computer, without altering their basic functions. Hypertexts such as the now old *Afternoon, a Story* by Michael Joyce (1987), considered by Robert Coover to be “the granddaddy of hypertext fictions” (1992), or more recent productions such as Stuart Moulthrop’s *The Color of Television* (with Sean Cohen, 1996) or *Hegirascope* (World3, 1995), Michael Joyce’s *Twelve Blue* (Eastgate Systems, 1996) or *Twilight, a Symphony* (Eastgate Systems, 1996), Adrienne Wortzel’s *The Electronic Chronicles* (1995), all available on the Internet, can only be read from a computer. Links between knots, word-buttons, multiple windows, sound effects, automated sequences as in *Hegirascope* cannot be transferred onto a piece of paper. The text itself can be printed, the images reproduced, but these are only a small part of the whole, like a still compared to a motion picture. The hypertext’s threshold is the computer and its softwares (Hypercard, Intermedia, Storyspace, etc.).

A hypertext is best described as a non-sequential text or writing where the reader controls the links between the fragments, without prior knowledge of the whole. When entering a hypertext, the reader is cast in the middle of a fiction, a loosely organised narrative which, depending on this reader’s ability to navigate through its many possibilities, he will learn to understand. No clear path is usually offered, no single road, but a set of crossroads. Linearity and sequentiality no longer exist. Their line is broken. Some knots or fragments of texts may have up to 20 links, each representing a different path, a version of the fictional world. To read is to activate these links, to advance without knowledge of a direction taken, hence the possibility of getting lost, of never finding what there is to understand in that fictional world. This possibility is supposedly part of the pleasure of hypertexts. For instance, Stuart Moulthrop will explain his recent *The Color of Television*, saying that it represents:

*a collage or collusion of words and images telling several stories, or perhaps one story in particular, in a carefully arranged random sequence. . . . The text as it now exists is woven from several threads, some of them stories, some of them documents of various kinds. . . . At the moment, the stories are strongly*

*linear. It is possible to read them from beginning to middle to something that could be an end. "Possible" does not imply "simple," however. Begin where you begin, go where you can go. You are done when it is over for you.*

Therefore, if we follow Moulthrop, it is up to the reader to decide when his reading is done, and independently from whatever the text has to offer, as if a hypertext was a store, with products on display from which to choose and to make our own fiction: a fragment of story here, some background there, a drop of description and a few lines of dialogue. Strangely enough, for writers like Ted Nelson, hypertexts are a form of anticconsumerism. Moulthrop quotes him, in the "about" section of *The Color of Television*, saying that "Ted Nelson once memorably insisted that hypertexts afford "free AND KNOWING user movement"—suggesting that works in this line might pose a direct challenge to Western consumerism." But, one may ask, is hypertext a challenge or a new dimension in consumerism? The problem lies not so much in the idea of free user movement but of a *knowing* user movement. In hypertexts, the reader might be free to do whatever he wants, but how can he know what he is doing, when he doesn't have a clue where he is headed (a variation on the hermeneutic circle)?

And the relation to consumerism isn't a simple one. For most users, fictional hypertexts are games and not literature. You find them on the Internet, you play a while, click on word-buttons to see what new image or text might appear, read a few texts, click again, and then you quit. Even a writer like Moulthrop will use, in his exploratory *Hegirascope*, a technology enabling a form of "client pull":

*Hegirascope employs the Netscape "META" tag to enable "client pull," which means that the word does not keep still. Almost every page in this text is programmed to yield automatically to another page after a delay of some seconds . . . . Of course, the page you arrive on via a link will also have a timed transition, and so forth, meaning that this text can in some cases become an infinite loop.*

*Client pull and timed transitions* produce a reading experience close to discomfort. One barely has time to read the link before it disappears. User movements are neither knowing nor free. But this, explains Moulthrop, is only an exploration of the possibilities of the medium. For, usually, hypertexts are presented as a new form of liberty, a democratization of the writing and reading process. In fact, this is the hypertextual doxa: reading is not just a simple form of communication anymore, the passive reception of information, but becomes an active process, comparable to writing itself. Michael Joyce, who has not only

created hypertexts but has written about them as well, claims that hypertextuality refuses the traditional hierarchy of the text.

*it is not merely that the reader can choose the order of what she reads but that her choices in fact become what it is. . . . hypertext is reading and writing electronically in an order you choose; whether among choices represented for you by the writer, or by your discovery of the topographic (sensual) organization of the text. Your choices, not the author's representations or the initial topography, constitute the current state of the text. You become the reader-as-writer. (Joyce 1991: § 13-14)*

This reader-as-writer, known also as the reader-author hypothesis (Landow 1992), seems however an aesthetic ideal, because, for the most part, when confronted with a fictional hypertext, one feels more like a reader-as-traveler, or even a reader-as-lost-traveler, than anything else. The openness of the hypertext calls for a complex experience, where inventiveness is required, the capacity to improvise, to draw inferences from little evidence, but where also confusion and ambiguity reign, as well as aimlessness. In fact, we could say that this reader-as-writer doxa is an illusion, a utopia brought forth by an interpretive community (Fish 1980), made up of writers like Moulthrop, Nelson and Joyce, who both write and theorize hypertexts, trying not so much to establish a history of reading practices (the way Chartier does for instance [1995]), but to impose new practices on the basis of their conceptions of textuality and hypertextuality. When navigating through a hypertext, the reader is not so much a writer as a traveler, a traveler lost in a labyrinth. He is lost not only in a maze of words and links, but also, and because of the specific nature of labyrinths, in a network of inconclusive thoughts. And it is because hypertexts behave as labyrinths that their readers cannot be writers, or readers-as-writers.

### The Broken Line

Hypertexts and labyrinths share formal features. Both are artifacts and made of intricate patterns: a work of art, when seen as a totality, and a prison, when experienced from the inside. Both offer a non-linear pattern or a broken line, which interrupt the continuous flow of progression to impose an extended series of decisions, as in a game of stop and go. Penelope Doob explains:

*The characteristic quality of movement through such a maze is halting, episodic, with each fork or alternative requiring a pause for thought and decision. The direction of movement is constantly shifting, now here, now there, as the wanderer's choices and the maze's path lead him . . . . The essence of the maze experience is confusion, doubt, and frustration as one ambiguity succeeds another. (1990: 46)*

Doob is describing classical and medieval representations of labyrinths and the experience thereof, but she may as well be talking about the use of fictional hypertexts. In her work on the labyrinth as a significant form, she acknowledges two distinct types of labyrinths: the unicursal model, which offers one single path or a continuous line from the beginning to the end; and the multicursal model, which offers numerous paths and, therefore, a broken line. It seems that, since the very first representations, there has been a “discrepancy between visual and literary paradigms of the labyrinth” (1990: 39). Visual representations have been traditionally unicursal. They were, according to Doob, “unambiguously two-dimensional, diagrammatic, showing the maze’s pattern from above” (1990: 40). Literary representations, on the other hand, have been multicursal. Their labyrinths were and still are complex constructions with chambers and winding paths which require “frequent testing and repeated confrontations, with no apparent end to the struggle until the goal or the entry is achieved” (1990: 46). This literary pattern is never presented from above, never grasped in its totality by the wanderer. In fact, it cannot be observed, it can only be experienced.

Therefore, in what can be seen as a surprising contradiction, literary texts, which are by definition linear, employ a non-linear model; whereas visual representations, non-linear in their essence, limit themselves traditionally to linear mazes (a unicursal structure is sufficient to identify it as a labyrinth). It is as if some form of equilibrium were thus achieved. For Doob, this contradiction is only a surface phenomenon, for both types of maze differ only in the number of choices required of the wanderer. In the unicursal model, only one choice is required: the choice to enter the labyrinth. In the multicursal model, many choices are necessary, as a decision must be made each time the traveler encounters a fork in the path. In this line of thought, hypertexts join both models. Even though they use visual components and rely, in effect, on a non-linear medium, they still employ and use a multicursal model. It is the perfect synthesis of form and content, which might explain why their identification with labyrinths is so pervasive.

The most famous multicursal labyrinth ever imagined is the one presented in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Built by Daedalus for Minos, to hide the offspring of Pasiphaë and Poseidon’s white bull, it was both inextricable and deadly. Theseus was able to get inside, kill the bull and exit with the help of Ariadne’s thread, provided by Daedalus. What may interest us here is that Theseus’ and Daedalus’ distinct experiences offer us two opposite perspectives on the labyrinth. The first one is Theseus’s, that is, the experience of the maze without prior knowledge; the second is Daedalus’s, a knowledge of the maze as a whole, without any

experience. As the architect of the labyrinth, Daedalus knows its pattern from a distance. It is for him a work of art, a structure, a static form. However, even though he can envision it from above, it becomes nonetheless a prison when he is trapped there with his son, by Minos who seeks revenge. He can escape, but only by way of a new invention, the wings that will cost Icarus his life, and not by an unwinding of the path that leads to freedom. Theseus, on the other hand, wanders in the labyrinth, explores its numerous paths, and escapes only with Ariadne's help. He doesn't know the way out, must improvise his route, just as the reader of a hypertext must decide what links to activate, based not on a prior knowledge, but a trial and error process.

The crux of the matter is that to wander through a labyrinth is to adopt a Thesean perspective, whereas to know it from above is to adopt a Daedalian one. And the same applies to hypertexts. To navigate through a fictional hypertext (or any other narrative for that matter [Faris 1988]), is to adopt a Thesean posture, while the Daedalian perspective is reserved for the creator or writer, who understands the whole structure without having to experience it. In a nutshell, what it means is that despite all the talk about the active process of reading and the choices offered, the user of a hypertext is never a reader-as-writer. He might be a reader-as-traveller; but, because of the two perspectives on the labyrinth, the possibility of adopting at first glance a writer's stance is foreclosed, contrary to the hypertext doxa.

### The Play of Musement

For my last remarks, I want to return to the idea of a traveller, of a lost traveller. One consequence of the Thesean adventure is that the labyrinth is not always necessarily a negative experience. It is for the young Athenians who die in it, but not for the one who finally leaves, having reached the center, defeated the Minotaur and found the exit. Such a positive interpretation of the labyrinth was present in Antiquity, it was even incorporated in medieval Catholicism, where the labyrinth was perceived as a metaphor both for life and the quest for salvation (it is also at the basis of recent spiritual interpretations of the labyrinth, in New Age thought and self help groups, where it is used as a spiritual tool. See, for instance, *Walking a Sacred Path* [Artress 1995]). But, to be such an experience, a center must be found and a thread must bring us back. If not, the labyrinth remains a prison, a form of musement, with no end in sight. In the same way, for a hypertext to become a distinct experience, one must find its center or its exit, and not just capitulate, in mid-sentence, in between two links, being both in the middle of something and at the center of nothing.

To be lost in its maze is to be incapable of knowing exactly where one stands, to be incapable of remembering, because to remember requires a standpoint.

The labyrinth is not a place for memory or the art of memoria. It is, instead, quite the opposite, a place designed for musement, for a mind wandering in its disjointed thoughts, as so many paths in a maze. Musement, defined initially by C.S. Peirce, is an essential feature of our cognitive process, it is imagination at work, free association, abductive inferences. But, like a labyrinth, an exit must first be found to seize it as an experience.

In the old art of memory, places were traditionally used as aids. Frances Yates has described this relationship in detail, in *The Art of Memory* (1966). The technique, she recalls, was to imprint on the memory a series of *loci* or places, in a building for instance. Then, the images by which a speech, a list or even an itinerary were to be remembered were “placed in imagination on the places which [had] been memorized in the building. This done, as soon as the memory of the facts [required] to be revived, all these places [were] visited in turn and the various deposits demanded of their custodians” (1966: 3). Numerous variations of this art were proposed throughout the centuries, but the need for a stable frame was always met.

In the context of this art, and because of its forks and the broken lines of its paths, its chambers which all resemble each other and whose disposition it is impossible to establish, its multicursal pattern<sup>2</sup>, the labyrinth is anything but a place of memory. Rather, it is a place where memory drifts, unhooked and freed from any restraints. Its rooms and objects are not placed in an orderly fashion, and it cannot be grasped as a totality. The art of memory implies a Thesean perspective, with its talks of an orderly stroll through its rooms, which does not fare well with a labyrinth. Therefore, it is not the ground for an art of memory, but for the play of musement. It is no accident that Theseus, the first to master it, was prone to memory lapses: he forgets Ariadne on the island of Naxos (according to some versions) and forgets to raise a white sail when approaching Athens. Forgetfulness seems an essential quality to master the labyrinth.

Musement: the term was defined by the American philosopher and semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce. He described it as an agreeable occupation of mind, which he was almost inclined to call *rêverie*:

*but for a frame of mind so antipodal to vacancy and dreaminess such a designation would be too excruciating a misfit. In fact, it is Pure Play. Now, Play, we all know, is a lively exercise of one's powers. Pure Play has no rules, except this very law of liberty. It bloweth where it listeth. It has no purpose, unless recreation. (1991: 262)*

Musement is, thus, pure play, randomness, the continuous but uncontrollable movement of our thoughts, as the ebb and flow of our imagination transport us. One could try to represent it by an interior monologue, or a stream of consciousness, with its liberties and disdain of coherence and continuity, of an organized and orderly act of remembering. It is not memory but invention. Its very nature is revealed, for instance, when a sudden event snaps us out of daydreaming, in the middle of a thought, and we briefly acknowledge its presence and density, or when we wake from a dream with the distinct impression that something important was being decided or some crucial scene played. Musement in itself cannot be described, it is beyond our reach, like what happens in the myth when Theseus enters the labyrinth and fights the Minotaur: these events are never described. In itself, the scene eludes us, even if we can try to recuperate some of its workings.

Musement is, in a Peircean logic, the very basis of our thought patterns and processes. It lies beneath the threshold of consciousness, making it possible. At the same time, consciousness is the only standpoint from which it can be grasped if ever so slightly. In fact, to gain access to it, for the experience of its labyrinth to become an event, recognizable, usable, we must have freed ourselves from its hold. We must adopt the role of an observer and look back at our own trajectory, which we couldn't understand at the exact moment it was unravelling. Closure thus appears an important part of its disclosure. If closure does put a stop to invention and imagination, it opens up a standpoint from which the results achieved can be interpreted. If one never leaves the labyrinth, this closure cannot be attained: the play of musement continues on, its own inventiveness lost in the process.

Now, if hypertexts are labyrinths and their experiences are similar, then they imply musement. This means that some form of closure is necessary, that the labyrinth can be exited, and not just deserted, once the user's interest has been exhausted. Musement must not be a permanent state. When Joyce asserts that, with a hypertext, closure is a suspect quality, and therefore that "when the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading ends," he propose a musement that never ends, or whose results can never be known. This stance may seem to promote a dynamic creative process, one which never ends, but in fact it only leads to a degraded form of musement, a form of indifference or of *oubli*.

The trend in contemporary literature has long been to free oneself from closure, in fact to break loose from any type of constraints whatsoever (linearity, literary conventions, sequentiality, etc.). But it is one thing to free oneself from a constraint, and another to be already freed from it. The computer as a medium does not impose closure the way the book does. So

it is not so much a constraint, in this context, as a tool, a strategy that helps a form coalesce. In fact, for hypertexts to become a genuine literary experience, forms of closure must be reinvented, instead of being shed like old skin.

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## Notes

1. This list is based on titles available at Amazon.com, the virtual bookstore on the Internet.
2. Yates continues: "Memory *loci* should not be too much like one another, for instance too many intercolumnar spaces are not good, for their resemblance to one another will be confusing" (1966: 7). They should be of moderate size, not be too brightly lighted, nor be too dark, etc. The visitor must be able to find what he is trying to remember as easily as possible, and not the contrary.

## *Writing Nature after the Formal Revolution*

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I. I want to propose as one of the subjects of our discussion the representation and significance of nature in the wake of the formal revolution. This is something I have been interested in for quite a while but have only very recently decided to explore more seriously, so what I will have to say is based on work hardly even “in progress.”

*Nature* perhaps sounds rather incongruous—at any rate rather traditional—in our present context, but (to borrow the title of a very impressive recent study by Lawrence Buell) *the environmental imagination* in literature *is* a subject that has provoked a considerable amount of reflection over the last few years. Buell predicts that “as ecocatastrophe becomes an increasingly greater possibility, so will the occasions for environmental apocalyptic expression and the likelihood that it will suffuse essay, fiction, film, sculpture, painting, theatre, and dance in unprecedentedly powerful, mind-haunting ways” (308). I would not put it quite like that but I do share Buell’s concern for different manifestations of contemporary environmental imagination.

My intention is not to make an inventory of examples but to ask if and how the literary environmental imagination may have been stimulated or even provoked by the formal revolution—or vice versa—and in consequence of this have bodied forth in renovated techniques. Ultimately, there is a problem of aesthetic values to be addressed. In fact, it is the problem of values that incites me in what follows to speak, not so much about nature than about the *pastoral* and, more by implication than in concrete detail, about the pastoral tradition. In connection with the pastoral

and its tradition I will have occasion to mention another canonical genre close to my heart: the *comic*.

Since the association of the pastoral and the comic is apt to surprise anyone but a Polonius—who, as you will recall, informs Hamlet of the existence of the “pastoral-comical” as well as the “tragical-comical-historical-pastoral” (*Hamlet*: II.2.392-94)—I must begin by justifying this association. Then, as an example of pastoral representative of the formal revolution, I will present a few passages from the work of Stanley Elkin. But mainly I want to point to four novels from the late eighties or early nineties that I take to be versions of reinvigorated pastoral—albeit ironical ones—, namely, Annie Dillard’s *The Living*, Peter Hoagland’s *Seven Rivers West*, Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, and Peter Matthiessen’s *Killing Mr Watson*. I will end by suggesting some questions concerning the problem of values inherent in the concept of an environmental imagination as it is embodied by my examples.

II. In joining like Polonius pastoral and comic, I do not mean that the two genres are necessarily linked. But as far as the values that have traditionally been associated with them are concerned, it is helpful to observe certain correspondences. To begin with, both the pastoral and the comic in American literary culture carry heavy ideological burdens. There is no need to describe in detail the profound significance of the pastoral tradition. Its effect is felt today by many Americans for whom, as Buell points out, “... a polluted universe seem[s] so perverse partly because the idea of nature as an integral realm, long sanctioned (...) by the American pastoral tradition, seem[s] so profoundly right” (292). It is indeed striking that despite technological revolution the essential image of America remains, for many, exurban, green, pastoral, even wild. The opposition between an arcadian and a dystopian (i.e. encroaching urban and industrialized) world is deeply ingrained in the pastoral ideology whether its roots reach back to puritanism, agrarianism, romanticism, or nationalism.

Roughly speaking, the arcadia-versus-dystopia opposition is also observable in connection with the comic. It can be found, generally, in many 19th century theories of the comic, Schopenhauer’s and Bergson’s, for example. Emerson<sup>1</sup>, in an essay on the comic, sees comic situations arise out of the inevitable incongruity between the universal mind speaking through nature and the individual mind in its historical and subjective limitedness. More down to earth, the “great American joke” has always tended to show up the pretensions of *civilization* with respect to the good sense of nature’s children. Huck Finn is a prime example of this strategy which promotes the pastoral ideology. The collaboration or even elective affinity between the pastoral and the comic, incarnated by Huck, can be traced well into the twentieth century. Saul Bellow’s *Augie March*, despite

his urban roots, is an example. In fact, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1966) could be seen as Bellow's struggle to free himself from the ideological burdens of the form.

Indeed, the evolution of twentieth-century history and culture cannot but make us aware of the fact that the reading of American pastoralism as "social conscience" (Buell) involves us in fiction—necessary fiction, perhaps, ideological fiction certainly. Critics of all hues—but in particular ethnocentric and feminist ones—have scrutinized the ideological *enjeux* of the pastoral. All of this is so well-known that I need not name names or give examples. The comic, especially in its pastoral aspect, has been subjected to similar ideological scrutiny. Again there is no need to expatiate on old debates, for example those on so-called black humour.

What is more important here is to ask if there has not been an underground existence of pastoral and comic in serious fiction roughly since the sixties, a kind of literary purgatory, which has given rise to new approaches to the pastoral, especially comical or ironic pastoral, inspiring and inspired by the environmental imagination. I mean by underground existence that the arcadian ideal inherent in the pastoral tradition and much American humour has been turned in against itself—subverted, perverted, deconstructed: whatever term for the metacritique of literary forms may seem appropriate.

In the work I have done on the comic<sup>2</sup>, I have found, generally speaking, that in much fiction associated with the formal revolution the various traditional forms of humour serve as rhetorical figures that manoeuvre the readers into a position in which they come face to face with their own ideological presuppositions. The comic turned against itself constitutes a form or figure of radical irony. For me, Robert Coover's story "Charlie in the House of Rue"<sup>3</sup> is a paradigmatic example of such radical irony.

As far as the underground existence of the pastoral is concerned, the story strikes me as being far more complicated, partly because it is linked to the question of environmental activism since the sixties. Let me just mention as literary examples, on the one hand, the lococentrism of native American appropriations of the pastoral tradition (by Leslie Marmon Silko in *Ceremony* (1977), for example) and, on the other, Annie Dillard's deconstructions of the genre's traditional anthropocentrism (in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982), for example). Indeed, Dillard's hybrid texts of literary non-fiction, her *nature writing*, are exemplary for the way in which they install a field of tensions between the terms of *nature* and *writing*: nature / writing.

I know that I am simplifying terribly. This is why I prefer to turn to a concrete example of pastoral from the underground period. It is taken from a writer who would not come to mind "naturally" in this context, but I admire the work of Stanley Elkin too much to be able to resist citing him.

III. I have in mind a passage from *The Franchiser* in which the central character, Ben Flesh, rides up into the Rocky Mountains on horseback, away from the signs of men (the Franchiser's logotypes), immersing himself in the scenes of nature. A classic situation of wilderness romance, which Elkin sets up in order to systematically dismantle the "romantic furniture" (Buell) of nature description. The readers are carefully prepared for this exercise by allusions to the traditional joke of the urbanite brought to his senses, literally, by the experience of the wilderness ("My balls are killing me," Ben complains as he is forced to dismount. "It was as if he had been straddling an elephant") (*The Franchiser* 179). The passages that follow this comic dénouement throw back at the readers the values the pastoral traditionally invokes—in particular the idea of nature mysteriously echoing human virtues of a moral or social order. It reads:

*He was in nature. As far as he could see. . . . And talked, when his breath was recovered of wonders. Because that was all there was to do in nature, the only way he could protect himself, no place to hide in nature save in the wonderful. He meant the bizarre, he meant the awful, strangenesses so odd, so alien, they were religious. Vouchsafed to die of his disease, it was as if here, in nature, where everything was a disease, all growth a sickness, the mountains a sickness and the trees a sickness, too, with their symptomatic leaves and their pathological barks, the progress of this disease could leap exponentially, travel his bloodstream like the venom of poisonous snakes or the deathbites of killer spiders (The Franchiser 199).*

The disease Ben suspects to be lurking in the trees and leaves and barks is ultimately ideological; it originates in the cultural valorization of nature. Elkin here dramatizes his refusal to treat nature description as a metaphor for human character. Nature becomes instead a space to be filled with characters. Letting Ben talk of wonders, Elkin creates his fictional topography in which it is the orientation-seeking reader who appears as nature's fool.

The ideological sickness that Elkin diagnoses in nature gives shape, in *The Magic Kingdom*, to some of his most powerful writing. The terrible list of "freaks" with which this novel ends is in a certain way the most extreme example of his dismantling of the pastoral impulse. I will just quote a few lines of this magnificent passage (it ostensibly represents the thoughts going through the mind of a woman in the act of making love and thinking of the possibility of conceiving a "freak"). The character thinks about making:

*... a troll, a goblin, broken imps and lurching oafs, felons of a nightmare blood, fallen pediatric angels, lemures, gorgons, cyclopes, Calibans, God's ugly punished customers, his obscene and frail and lubberly, his gargoyle, flyblown hideosities and blemished, poky mutants... (The Magic Kingdom 316)*

Elkin here conceives a body out of words, creates, so to speak, supernatural nature. Is it because of Elkin's focus on pain and sickness that we cannot in reading this passage shake off the disconcerting sense of the thereness of his supernatural creatures? Of course it is hard to speak of this passage as comic; but the traditional association of pastoral and comic is still present, albeit in a subverted fashion, in the way in which Elkin's version of the pastoral puts the readers on the spot.

I don't want to try to establish Elkin as a model of pastoral writing. I could have mentioned many different, certainly more obvious examples. But I think Elkin's work, because it is so uncompromisingly and provocatively formalist, poses more clearly than others the challenge that pastoralism faces. This challenge could be described by Buell's term of an *aesthetics of dual accountability* (98), i.e. pastoral should play (as Elkin's does) on its *textuality*, but at the same time develop *referentiality* or *circumstantiality*, giving a sense of the incontestable thereness of nature which, in these times of impending ecocatastrophe, is perhaps comparable (see Elkin again) to the thereness of sickness or pain. More practically and down to earth, we might perhaps expect that the challenge posed by the formal revolution could have ushered in a renewed interest in nature *description*.

IV. Now, I think that the novels of Dillard, Hoagland, Matthiessen and McCarthy are in some sense responses to this challenge. I do not want to overemphasize the representativeness of these four authors. I know that some would insist that more pertinent, perhaps also more critically independent developments of the pastoral tradition are undertaken by, for example, native American writers like Silko or Erdrich. I draw attention to these four novels quite simply because they imitate classical forms of the pastoral such as the wilderness romance (Hoagland), the pioneer novel (Dillard and Matthiessen) and the Western (McCarthy) and for that reason alone raise the question of renovated techniques.

All four novels are historical, set in the second half of the nineteenth century, and all four are revisionary in the most obvious ideological sense of denouncing colonialism, imperialism and racism. That is important in itself, of course, but to me the main literary interest lies in their *foregrounding* of pastoral rhetoric, for these writers are all, in their different intertextual ways, nature fakers, makers (and re-makers) of fictions about nature. Imitating traditional pastoral forms is a strategy that helps evoke the ambiguous cultural agenda that informs the pastoral and thus to explore the confines and the possibilities of the environmental imagination today. As I see it, my four writers present two different realizations of an aesthetics of dual accountability: one I will call (borrowing once again from Buell) *rhetoric of relinquishment*, the other *rhetoric of replenishment*.

Hoagland and McCarthy develop a rhetoric of relinquishment, i.e. foreground nature *space*. In both novels such rhetoric is relativized by a kind of ironic incarnation of the contradictions that dog the attitude of relinquishment. Hoagland gives us Sasquatch or Big Foot, the legendary Wild Man of the mountains who, like the white whale of yore, draws attention to both the obsession and the limitations of Hoagland's representation of the wilderness since it seems, on the one hand, to defy the categories of natural science and, on the other, to be on the way to extinction before it can be "discovered." It is a mythopoeic creature for, like Hoagland's beautiful evocation of Rocky Mountains wildlife and its habitat (over which Big Foot presides), it is only an intertextual trace of something real—a ghost haunting Hoagland's thick description.

In McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* it is the aptly named Judge, a grotesque superhuman character, who incarnates the ambiguities of the pastoral impulse (his rifle bears the inscription *Et in Arcadia Ego*). His seemingly inescapable presence throughout the novel mockingly reminds us that McCarthy's powerful descriptions of nature spaces (which he seems to offer us as a kind of consolation for the bestiality of his narrative) has itself emerged out of a cultural tradition of violent appropriation of space. We find descriptions such as the following one, seemingly cut off from their traditional anthropocentric signification:

*In the evening they came out upon a mesa that overlooked all the country to the north. The sun to the west lay in a holocaust where there rose a steady column of small desert bats and to the north along the trembling perimeter of the world dust was blowing down the void like the smoke of distant armies. The crumpled butcherpaper mountains lay in sharp shadowfold under the long blue dusk and in the middle distance the glazed bed of a dry lake lay shimmering like the mare imbrium and herds of deer were moving north in the last of the twilight, harried over the plain by wolves who were themselves the color of the desert floor. (Blood Meridian 105)*

This spectacular vista elicits no reaction from the characters seeing it and no comment on their relation to the land is forthcoming. The land remains space, only implying place. However, the judge's pronouncements represent, so to speak, a return of what McCarthy has repressed in the interest of this rhetoric of relinquishment; he proclaims for example: "Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth" (*Blood Meridian* 198).

Big Foot and Judge are, in sum, ironical reminders of the ideological stakes of Hoagland's and McCarthy's rhetoric of relinquishment. They stop short the reader's "pastoral escape" which, as Buell reminds us, is "the great tradition within American literary naturism."

In contrast to the rhetoric of relinquishment, Dillard and Matthiessen develop a rhetoric of replenishment that fills the scenes of nature with the signs of men. But rather than telling a story of colonization, the signs that convert wilderness into *place* spell out a multitude of stories since they are shot through with the contradictions of social, cultural, sexual and ethnic difference. Hence Dillard's Bellingham Bay area and Matthiessen's Everglades do not appear to us as Nature but as natures, according to the differing attitudes settlers, native inhabitants, drifters and outlaws project onto the land.

Dillard's and Matthiessen's multi-perspectival novels evoke attitudes of exploitation and stewardship, hatred and affection, pastoralism and science, natural and christian religion, aesthetics and economy. This is particularly striking in Matthiessen's novel which employs not just a multiplicity of perspectives but also of voices in recounting versions of a period of local history during which the fragile ecosystem of the Everglades is irrecoverably damaged. In testifying to their sense of place, these voices create for the readers a sense of environment as a tension filled semiotic field. In sum, nature in Matthiessen as well as in Dillard is meaningful, place rather than space—both Dillard and Matthiessen are remarkably well documented about their specific periods of regional settlement history—but place that escapes any globalising perception by the reader.

Matthiessen and Dillard thus have no need for ironic incarnations of pastoral's ambiguity, for ambiguity is bodied forth in the self-contradictoriness of their rhetoric of replenishment. But whether the figure of radical irony be interiorized, as with Dillard and Matthiessen, or exteriorized, as with Hoagland and McCarthy, it has the effect of underlining the problem of *dual accountability*, i.e. of pastoral's complicated negotiation between textuality and referentiality. Perhaps one could say that pastoralism interpreted in this fashion tends towards a kind of *re-invention of the real*.

V. So much then for my examples of contemporary environmental imagination. Needless to insist that these writers do not constitute a kind of canon for me. Rather, they have made me aware of certain questions, a few of which I would like to raise by way of a conclusion to this presentation. The main one is, of course: is the environmental imagination an aesthetic value? Does it constitute some kind of criterion for judging writing? Environmentalism cannot be imposed as a kind of *ecological correctness*. It is because it seems to suggest something like that that I am not happy with the quotation from Buell about environmental apocalypticism with which I began.

But perhaps one could turn the problem around and say that revising and reinvigorating the pastoral—e.g. by exploring the implications of an

aesthetics of dual accountability—remains a valid way of thinking about nature and thus constitutes one powerful stimulus to the environmental imagination. For me this stimulus is *formal* as much as it is a question of subject matter. Can there be something like an environmental consciousness in literary forms, perhaps especially in what Philippe Hamon calls *le descriptif*? Is there some kind of interchange between renovated techniques and environmental consciousness? I realize that I might be reverting to a kind of neo-romanticism with these questions. Buell, too, incidentally uses Thoreau as his central reference. However that may be, I think there is an important question of *literariness* involved in contemporary pastoralism.

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### Notes

1. Cf. Ralph Waldo Emerson. "The Comic". *The Dial*, IV (October 1843): 247-56.
2. See my *Comic Sense. Reading Coover, Elkin, Roth*. Basel and Boston: Birkhäuser, 1993.
3. Cf. Robert Coover. *Charlie in the House of Rue*. Lincoln: Penmaen Press, 1980. Reprinted in Robert Coover, *A Night at the Movies*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

## *The Rise of Modern Doggerel*

ELLEN HINSEY\*

*Doggerel: "Not poetry but mere—verse"*  
Webster's *Third New International Dictionary*

It will not come as a surprise to either the readership of American contemporary poetry or to contemporary American poets themselves that a new and modern variation of doggerel is well installed among us. It is, of course, a misnomer to say "new" as it takes quite some time for a style, be it in poetry, painting or music, to become sufficiently predictable as to become a sort of mechanical pastiche of itself or "doggerel". And while it is difficult, or rather impossible, to determine the exact moment a literary trend has turned on itself, no longer the liberator of creative energies it once was (as all changes in art are, at least initially), it is nevertheless something that does finally come home to roost, and then one seems to see it everywhere.

I have chosen to coin the term "modern doggerel" (one could also say minor or trivial poetry) precisely for some of the associations it brings with it. In addition to its familiar connotation of easy rhyme and predictable content (although these too may be at play), the definition I choose to draw on is that which Northrop Frye put forth in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye characterized doggerel as an unfinished creative process, in which a "prose initiative" has never assumed the associative qualities of true poetry, and reveals this failure by attempting to resolve the technical difficulties through any means that suggest themselves.

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The struggle to arrive at true poetry is a task which all generations must contend with, although *what* they must struggle with, or against, is always changing. And—as in all periods—artists of the late twentieth century operate under the assumption that they will not commit aesthetic errors as their poetic forefathers and foremothers did—or at least not the same ones. It is therefore with a sense of impunity that contemporary poets distance themselves from the imagery and phrasing of that much scorned and derided entity “Victorian verse” with which modern poetry so triumphantly and conclusively made its rupture. Hence all the facets that made up the “bad” verse of that period, including the obvious rhymes and labored meter, the easy sentimentality and all those roses and trellises have been swept away, and doggerel with it. We *know*, and have been well instructed, that *that* is what makes for bad verse.

I have chosen as an example a stanza from “The Tendril’s Fate” by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, from a sampler of verse entitled *Poems of Power*, published first in 1903<sup>1</sup>:

*Under the snow, in the dark and the cold,  
A pale little sprout was humming;  
Sweetly it sang, 'neath the frozen mould,  
Of the beautiful days that were coming.*<sup>2</sup>

In this selection we indeed have some of the predictable elements: an unvaried meter and expected rhyme. And, of course, the ever-present garden. But, since form is only one element of the phenomena of doggerel (for much brilliant satire is written in formulaic meter and rhyme) one must add that the *raison d'être* of the poem—for which the metrical structure exists as a sort of prosodic urn—is to provide solace, and this is attempted (albeit clumsily) through the assonance within the lines.

That form and content are inextricably mixed in such verse is not a new idea. Harriet Monroe, one of the founding editors of *Poetry* magazine, in her introduction to *The New Poetry* (1917) described the program of the anglophone *vers-libristes* in the following way, elucidating the evils of both the *form* and *content* of Victorian verse:

*What is the new poetry? and wherein does it differ from the old? The difference is not in mere details of form, for much poetry infused with the new spirit conforms to the old measures and rhyme-schemes. It is not merely in diction, though the truly modern poet rejects the so-called “poetic” shifts of language—the deems, 'neaths, forsooths, etc., the inversions and high-sounding rotundities, familiar to his predecessors: all the rhetorical excesses through which most Victorian poetry now seems “over-appareled”... In this effort they discard not only archaic diction but also the shop-worn subjects . . .*<sup>3</sup>

One must admit the modernists had a point. Monroe continues:

*All this implies no disrespect for tradition... On the contrary, they follow the great tradition when they seek a vehicle suited to their own epoch and their own creative mood, and resolutely reject all others.*<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the necessity of renewing language is one of a poet's primary and ongoing tasks. Articulated in various ways over the past hundred years—from Pound's "make it new" to rap poetry—this act has often required radical shifts and reevaluations of both form and content. Such renewals are essential to the development and vitality of the art. For fin de siècle poets, for example, this was a task, as Czeslaw Milosz describes it, of destroying "the automation of opinion and beliefs transmitted through a frozen, inherited style."<sup>5</sup>

However, to return to our own poetic moment, what is the situation with contemporary American verse? Our problems are certainly not the ones faced by the early modernists. But although we would like to believe that by avoiding the specific excesses of the Victorian era we have slipped through the bounds of "doggerel", one has only to make a random selection of poems from any respectable literary journal to see that we have indeed developed our own "frozen and inherited style". For, in history, as well as literature, one is never taken more by surprise than when one is fighting a rear-guard action. More likely than not the aesthetic afflictions of a previous generation will not be the lot of the next.

A century after its "discovery" the triumph of *vers libre* is complete. For, despite some growing attempts to revive formal verse, the bulk of contemporary poetry is written in "free verse" or loose stanzaic form. A non-specialist in poetry would be perhaps surprised to find out how much time is still devoted in poetry workshops to "free-verse" vs. "form" debates. Equally surprising, these discussions still often maintain a "free-verse-as-progressive" and "formal-verse-as-conservative" dichotomy. In reality, discussions of form are, for the most part, fairly inert—as contemporary poets seem to lack a dynamic feel for form as a vehicle of expression. Form must join content in an organic whole, and "form for form's sake"—which at times seems the banner of some of the recent revivals in formalism—does not therefore represent an improvement on the old "free verse". As for content, one can say without hesitation that current journals are filled with confessional lyrics relating to unhappy childhoods, failed marriages, and sexual abuse, with poems that take place in cars and near highways seeming to make up the remaining percentage.

Any generalizations will naturally leave out brilliant exceptions. There are many living poets who are either treating different subjects or writing about personal subjects with tremendous skill. Yet, if we return to our

definition of doggerel as an “unfinished creative process” that has led in our time to its own form and proliferation of a *codified form and range of subject matter*, then only a passing look at the work featured in numerous journals will attest to this phenomenon. And whether it is because an inordinate amount of time has been spent debating what should now be a dead issue, i.e. form vs. free verse, or for another reason, the subsequent question of content has too often been overlooked. For, as Milosz pointed out, an inherited style can precisely imply “the automatism of opinions and beliefs” of which poetry can be made an unwitting vehicle.

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The poet of today has behind her or him a complex poetic and intellectual heritage. At the risk of oversimplification, if there is one aesthetic trend that currently dominates American poetry it is the legacy of Confessionalism. In saying this, however, one must make a distinction between contemporary confessionalism and the confessionalism of the poets of the late fifties and early sixties. What I would term “contemporary confessionalism” is not the terse, erudite and measured work of Lowell, or the early Plath. These poets had a wide and deep *culture*, as the French would call it, and—as is particularly the case with Lowell—sturdy underpinnings which allowed forays into progressively colloquial language to appear seamless and deceptively natural. The “high confessionalist” poets had a specific need in mind, like the early French *vers-libristes*: they sought to enlarge language, to update its idiom in order to express what they needed to say. Still, despite the surface of the work, despite the seemingly stripped-down nature of the idiom, the best work of the confessionalists are poems of substantial richness and complexity.

Revealingly, even among themselves, poets of that generation acknowledged concerns and varying degrees of success with this new idiom. Elizabeth Bishop deemed Anne Sexton’s work in comparison with Lowell’s experiments in *Life Studies* as “egocentric—simply that.”<sup>6</sup> As is often the case, the dissemination of a style no longer in the hands of the talented practitioner leads precisely to the type of banalization that paves the way for a new form of “doggerel”. And whether Bishop’s evaluation is entirely just as regards the often talented Sexton, her concern—that of “egocentric—simply that”—now strikes a particularly disquieting note.

Confessionalism—so called—was for its originators a way to both break out of an Audenesque formalism as well as away from Eliot’s still-pervasive imperative of impersonal poetry. Poets of what has now been termed the “middle generation” had begun to feel that “writing according to the dictates of Eliot began to seem...less a heroic intellectual endeavor and more of an act of...self-betrayal.”<sup>7</sup> However, the story of the middle

generation is also intimately bound up with the individual fates of its practitioners, and not a minor mixing of psychoanalysis and poetry. As has been exhaustively documented, the psychic states, breakdowns of Lowell and eventual suicides of Sexton and Plath have added a specific, and not negligible, spin to the legacy. Lowell, particularly in his middle work, was probably the most successful in bridging the gap between the formal and the personal, and is unfortunately the least emulated. The incredible popularity of Plath's late work—not exclusively her best—has had for more than three decades now the opposite effect: inducing among her followers not a disciplined exploration of the human condition, but a psychic “letting go”, an aesthetic trend that has dovetailed neatly with the proliferation of therapy and therapeutic jargon on the American scene.

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It is essential at this juncture in American poetry to explore some of the deeper implications of “psychoanalytic confessionality”, and to consider its actual effect on poetry; for, like Naturalism of the 1880s and Idealism of the *fin de siècle*, psychoanalysis, and psychology in general, has become during our period far more than a cultural phenomenon or medical technique. Not only has it been for quite some time a more or less overt aesthetic, but it has also begun in many quarters to eclipse all other value criteria, and as such, represents an adherence to a philosophical viewpoint.

While the current adoption of psychology as a working philosophy is a vast topic, I would like to treat here a key aspect of its effect on contemporary poetry. This is the progressive re-definition of the “I” in American verse, and a subsequent subtle but definite shift toward the “self” and the “other” as objects. One might go so far as to say that there have come to exist two different “I”s in contemporary American poetry: the “therapeutic I”, which is self-reflective, and therefore “object” oriented, and the “traditional” or axiomatic “I” which historically has involved an implicit relationship with the reader.

Psychoanalysis, insofar as it bases its technique on a scientific method, has used the isolating of the self in order to render it “a comprehensible object.”<sup>8</sup> The “self”, so considered as object, for the goals of psychoanalysis, has revealed a wealth of data that allows for psychological interventions. However, the poem which employs the first of these methods, the therapeutic “I”, has at its base a goal of self-analysis and self revelation, for which the poem acts as testimony. The process of the poem is one of identifying—often within a scope of predefined categories such as childhood trauma, abuse or sexuality—certain “memories” and then finding a form for their expression.

At the base, this “objectification” and isolating of experience by the poet creates a texture in the poetry itself. Rather than communicating directly with the reader or working from an implied relationship, the poem asks the reader to understand and sympathize with the *author’s* relationship to *his or her own history*. As such the poem becomes a hermetic space of personal experience. Under these conditions the scope of poetry undergoes the stultifying transition from communication to transcript. I take the first three stanzas of a poem by Timothy Muskat entitled “Zephyr” as an example of this “self as object” texture:

*When my Airedale died I crawled into the dark  
doghouse and lay down as the ghost of him  
ran through me. That night, sleeping,  
the chambers of my heart in ruins, I pleaded*

*with God. Curled into myself, wind circling  
like a nighthawk in the far away fields, something  
stirred, muted, from a distance. In the morning  
thirteen years passed overhead in the clouds.*

*Understand me here: I know he was only a dog.  
But grief is a faint light flashing on a mountaintop  
while you are in a valley far below, tied  
in darkness, like a dog, unable to move.<sup>9</sup>*

On the other hand, the traditional or axiomatic relationship of the writer to the reader involves a fluid, less clearly defined and more generous “I”. This “I”, while naturally originating with the author, nevertheless contains within it an opening towards the reader: it encompasses not only “personal” experience but orients itself towards multiplicity. It is this second sort of relationship which Martin Buber describes in his famous work *I and Thou*. For Buber any “I” that does not include a corresponding “thou” turns both the self and the other into objects, eliminating the possibility of real communication. The result is a lifeless one:

*...the I that is not bodily confronted by a You but surrounded by a multitude of “contents,” has only a past and no present. In other words: insofar as a human being makes do with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no presence. He has nothing but objects; but objects consist in having been.<sup>10</sup>*

Thus, for Buber the encounter with another can only take place when the “I” is not oriented towards itself—implicitly knowing that the severing off of individual experience leads not to understanding but further isolation.

Instances of this axiomatic “I” are of course examples of the great works of literature: Shakespeare’s sonnets, Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*, Donne’s *Anniversaries*. But one does not have to look to previous eras to find such a perspective. In this century we have, among others, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, Akhmatova’s *Requiem* or, more recently, the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz. All of these works contain a space where the reader is invited to enter and join the poet in his or her journey. The texture of the poem is therefore necessarily altered. I take for example a poem by Milosz entitled “Encounter”<sup>11</sup>:

*We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.  
A red wing rose in the darkness.*

*And suddenly a hare ran across the road.  
One of us pointed to it with his hand.*

*That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,  
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.*

*O my love, where are they, where are they going  
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.  
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.*

While the work of Milosz—one of the great poetic craftsmen of our century—embodies in particular this opening between the writer and the reader, numerous other examples could be offered. Above all, the actual implication of this struggle in aesthetics—and ultimately philosophical perspectives—should not be minimized. The continued existence of a generous “I” in poetry is not only a technical choice, but an affirmation of the complexity—but necessity—of shared human experience.

It is essential therefore for contemporary poets to ask what has been gained and lost by the inculcation of a therapeutic aesthetic. For what started in a previous generation as a broadening of range has become, for poets at the end of the century, a limiting of context and possibility. The vantage point “I can only speak for *my own* experience” carries with it an implicit adherence to a form of subjectivism so popular in our century. It perhaps does not go without saying that such a view is not universal. A subjective and/or psychoanalytic construction of experience—and of suffering in particular—remains only one possible conception. It is only recently that suffering has become a trauma to be cured, rather than a state that binds us to the human condition. One has only to look to the French philosopher Simone Weil’s concept of the “gift of affliction” to find an eloquent example of the interconnectedness—and perhaps even sacrifice—that suffering and its communication entails.

As American poets we are not in such a period of generosity or discipline. While self-sacrifice has become increasingly foreign to us, the

axiomatic and encompassing “I” that reaches beyond its own boundaries can still be found in most world literatures, particularly in those places where the hope of a psychological cure for suffering is not only unlikely, but absurd.

\* \* \*

It appears then that our contemporary form of doggerel has these qualities: a loosely-built lyric related to personal experience that, on the whole, has neither the technical nor the philosophical basis to transcend its particularity. Minor poetry for the Victorian poet, as we have seen, may have meant a reliance on a too-regular meter and a set of stock images. For the contemporary poet, mired in a “prose initiative”, it often means relying on sincerity and personal anecdote as the “means that suggest themselves” when confronted with problems of poetic construction. Just as Victorian values may have blinded artists to the banality of the then current subject matter, so the contemporary primacy of the psychoanalytic model shields the writer—and often the critic—from the current doggerel. For, increasingly, material presented in poetry must be responded to as it would be in a therapeutic session—at the risk that any critique of its banality might be construed as a lack of compassion.

However, as a new generation of poets we have the opportunity to question these cultural givens and ask in what direction they are leading us. Rather than rehash old polemics about form vs. free verse—for Eliot’s definition that all verse is formal and one can only distinguish between good and bad verse still seems viable—we might better ask what we are writing about, from what viewpoint, and to what end. If indeed in 1998 it has become a cliché to write about childhood trauma, then certainly a reevaluation of both the means and the goals seems in order. And if this seems burdensome one must admit that the demands of poetry have never changed: it is just that one has the impression that recently someone has lowered the bar.

In Adrienne Rich’s most recent volume there is a disquieting lyric reflection on these matters, addressing the realms of poetry and society alike. The poem, which I quote in full, is entitled “In Those Years”<sup>12</sup>:

*In those years, people will say, we lost track  
of the meaning of we, of you  
we found ourselves  
reduced to I  
and the whole thing became  
silly, ironic, terrible:  
we were trying to live a personal life  
and, yes, that was the only life  
we could bear witness to*

*But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged  
into our personal weather  
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove  
along the shore, through the rags of fog  
where we stood, saying I*

Indeed the birds of history are always moving. Contemporary poets have a responsibility to be more than the passive carriers of received ideas and current jargon. Despite what the last half-century has done to proliferate a simplified and popular form of verse, it has not gotten easier to write poetry. The task remains what it always has been: demanding, formidable, and most often, painfully elusive.

## Notes

1. The copy I possess of this book was published in 1910—its thirteenth printing.
2. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Poems of Power* (London: Gay and Hancock, Ltd., 1910) 98.
3. Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson, eds., *The New Poetry* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923). From introduction to first edition (1917) xxxv-xxxvi.
4. *Ibid.* xxxvi.
5. Czeslaw Milosz, *Emperor of the Earth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 65.
6. David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989) 209.
7. Bruce Bawer, *The Middle Generation* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1986) 120.
8. Peter Gay, *Freud* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) xvii.
9. SRPR Illinois Poet, Timothy Muskat, "Zephyr", *The Spoon River Poetry Review* Vol. XXI, No. 1 Winter/Spring 1996: 62.
10. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 63-64.
11. Czeslaw Milosz, *Bells in Winter* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1974) 3.
12. Adrienne Rich, *Dark Fields of the Republic* (New York Norton 1995) 4.

# *Reconfiguring Lyricism: New Directions in American Poetry*

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It is a commonplace to assert that postmodernism has been concerned with the death of the subject—if not her death, at least his displacement and/or deferment—and concerned as well with the return of this ‘same’ subject under various parodic guises. Slightly belated—or perhaps I had rather say, parodically at the avant-garde—poetry has, over the past two decades, tried to confirm the demise of the *self*. Or has it? It seems to me that one of the characteristics of poetic utterance is precisely that it cannot do away with the paradoxes of the *personal* voice as readily as this may be done in fiction, where a complex array of masks, personae and other impersonation devices allows room for instant dialogism and the contextualization of voice. Unless, of course, ‘poetry’ be subsumed under the category of ‘narrative,’ which by the way is one of the major directions into which (*back* into which?) it has for some time been moving, with a Steinian twist, as is exemplified in Lyn Hejinian’s now classic *My Life*, the rhapsodic story-telling of David Antin ‘talk poems,’ Leslie Scalapino’s dream-like narratives, or, very differently, Susan Howe’s poetic meditations on History.

Still, what I am interested in here is the persistence of some kind of lyricism—however skewed it might sometimes sound—in even the most radically anti-personal poetry that is being written today. It is this paradox of a *lyricism emerging from formal disruptions themselves* that I would like to emphasize in the following brief statement on contemporary American poetry.

In a sumptuous essay on lyricism entitled “La quatrième personne du singulier” (“The Fourth Person Singular”), the French poet and theoretician

Jean-Michel Maulpoix has specifically underlined the irreducibly and problematically personal nature of the lyrical poem. But, instead of approaching lyricism from the perspective of a transparently personal expression, he rightly states that lyric poetry—and perhaps poetry at large—creates only “the effect of a subject,” which diffracts the first (grammatical) person into displaced instances, or accidents, of *something like* “selfhood.” The lyric self would thus be but a figurative re-description of the empirical self in what Maulpoix calls the fourth person singular:

*[L]a poésie est une écriture qui ne saurait produire autre chose qu'un effet de sujet, en articulant des voix dans la langue. [...] Le sujet lyrique, c'est la voix de l'autre qui me parle, c'est la voix des autres qui parlent en moi, et c'est la voix même que j'adresse aux autres...<sup>1</sup>*

As a counterpoint to this theoretical position, one can cite poet Rae Armantrout's subtle deconstruction of selfhood in her short poem “No Matter”:

*First person  
is relative  
placement of the phantom  
limbs and organs, a holding  
pattern which rises  
and sinks from sight  
to suit me.  
I like the play  
of light because  
it touches me  
and doesn't;  
it stimulates  
the way I feign being  
touched and turning over,  
(in my grave)  
rustling.<sup>2</sup>*

Such a statement renders the delicate membrane connecting at least two versions of the same “self” almost palpable in the haunting arrangement of the words themselves in the sentences. So far removed from “First” in the opening lines, “me” does look problematical and to “suit” her would mean to lose her—whoever she may be—somewhere along the line, a ghostly self both present and absent, “ris[ing] and sink[ing] from sight.”

I should like to argue that acknowledging the tension between the demise and the perpetuation of the self—a politically charged issue in the context of multiculturalism—might help us to accommodate the

overwhelming diversity we are confronted with when reading contemporary American poetry. I would also like to point out along the way the link there is between this diversity and the programmatic marginalization of poetry that will prove increasingly vital if the dissenting voice of poetry wants still to be heard in the hyper-mediatized 21st century.

Paradoxically, poetry has needed to move away from the very concept of personal voice for its dissenting voice to be heard afresh. This movement away from the belief that individual 'voice' was the palpable proof of a poet's genuinely personal idiom, the treasured secret of his difference giving him access to hitherto untapped layers of emotion, started way back in the early 1970s, as Marjorie Perloff rightly notes in her invaluable study, *Radical Artifice: Poetry in the Age of Media*, when she comments upon Denise Levertov's definition of "Organic Poetry." For Levertov, the poet is "brought to speech" as she/he feels the intensity of an experience that calls for a form, or shape, or words:

Brought to speech: *this might be the epigraph—or perhaps the epitaph—of sixties poetry in America. For by 1971 we find a poet like Robert Grenier writing:*

Why imitate "speech"? Various vehicle that American speech is in the different mouths of any of us, possessed of particular powers of colloquial usage, rhythmic pressure, etc., it is only such. To me, all speeches say the same thing..... I HATE SPEECH.

*And a few years later, Charles Bernstein observes that "There is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is intended, chosen. That is what makes a thing a poem."*<sup>3</sup>

In more trenchant words, Bernstein has elsewhere lampooned those poets he sees as fabricating a poetic voice they use to create "simulations of [emotion] in patterns of words they've already heard": "In fact," he writes, "the people here are so ideologically pro-emotion they make it into an abstract concept that is more theoretical than the intellectuality they renounce."<sup>4</sup> Let it be noted that the parodic efficacy of such a declaration relies on the fact that this passage of Bernstein's text is part of the speech of "a sympathetic-looking woman" who, in mock poetic-guide fashion, answers a query about the meaning of the word 'emotion'—the whole text being itself conceived as an answer to fellow-poet Bernadette Mayer's book *Utopia*. Being caught in such a rich web of discourses, Bernstein's deconstruction of 'voice' is therefore not immune to self-parody (like the whole of the book *The Sophist*) and such a polemical declaration as the above claim should not, indeed cannot, be taken at face value. By jeopardizing his own declarations of principle as he frames them in

problematical discursive contexts, and by weaving into his text the possibility for criticism in the form of a dialogue between poetry and theory, Bernstein invites the reader to pursue the debate on the locus of voice—a notoriously u-topian place—on a metatextual level. For Bernstein and other poets of the same trend, voice can no longer be the transparent expression of a singular self: rather, it must become a dialogic tool, the coalescence of various discourses in which dissonance is what counts most<sup>5</sup>.

The witty poem Ron Padgett wrote as his own personal epitaph to voice, precisely entitled “Voice,” is yet another instance of the kind of criticism the self has been the target of in recent American poetry:

*I have always laughed  
when someone spoke of a young writer  
“finding his voice.” I took it  
literally: had he lost his voice?  
Had he thrown it and had it  
not returned? Or perhaps they  
were referring to his newspaper  
The Village Voice? He’s trying  
to find his Voice.  
What isn’t  
funny is that so many young writers  
seem to have found this notion  
credible: they set off in search  
of their voice, as if it were  
a single thing, a treasure  
difficult to find but worth  
the effort. I never thought  
such a thing existed. Until  
recently. Now I know it does.  
I hope I never find mine. I  
wish to remain a phony the rest of my life.<sup>6</sup>*

The self-reflexive nature of Padgett’s punch-line is of course enhanced by the fact that ‘phony’—in the sense of ‘fake’—has an alternative spelling with a silent ‘e,’ while ‘phony’ (this time as ‘voice’) is *not* a full word in English but a root used in the formation of other words, among which ‘aphonic’ and ‘aphonia’ (but not ‘aphony’ in one word). The shifting meanings of this ‘word’ clearly depend upon the blanks and gaps it creates in the meaning-making abilities of a poet’s ‘voice.’ The poem itself is a parody of the casual confessional mode it seems to adopt and the final word(s) seems to silence, or “bring to silence” rather than to speech, the personal voice that hammers the first-person pronoun into the reader’s head: the blank that isolates the “I” of the penultimate line from “wish” registers the shift into a productive silence. What “Voice” challenges, then,

is the unified self of a so-called first person that claims to be 'natural' and 'genuinely expressive' of an inner coherence. Such coherence is denounced as an illusion, since the 'naturalness' of the poet's voice is only a measure of the poet's aphonia, gagged as he/she is by the omnipresence of precisely the same 'natural' idiom in the vulgarized mediaspeak which is served on one TV programme after another.

Indeed, there are, to quote Marjorie Perloff, "increasing difficulties placing the 'self' in the 'world' at a time when 'sensitivity,' 'authenticity,' and 'being in touch with one's feelings' have been co-opted by the voices and faces on the video screen."<sup>7</sup> In this perspective, the poetry of voice is at best doomed to ventriloquy. ("Ventriloquy/is the mother tongue," Rae Armantrout wittily remarks<sup>8</sup>.) Consequently, as Perloff further argues,

*the poetic attempt to hold on to some measure of a unique and natural voice—what Charles Bernstein calls, with reference to Olson, "the phallacy of the heroic stance"—with its masculinist allegory of language as the stride of a man and its idealization of voice as the locus of authority—is increasingly giving way to a poetry that, as Bernstein says of Ron Silliman, "emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed, everywhere circumscribed by grammar & syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, organized, & so an artifice, artifact—monadic, solipsistic, homemade, manufactured, mechanized, formulaic, willful."<sup>9</sup>*

In this claim for radical artifice, we can already recognize, however, the paradoxical return of a sort of hyper-individuality every bit of which is shaped by the awareness of its constructedness and which therefore bears, in the words of critic George Hartley, "the traces of its sociality"<sup>10</sup>, as the avalanche of adjectives in Bernstein's characterization indicates. Far from laying claims to a dubious authenticity which would imply the transparency of language—as if the poet could somehow dispense altogether with the medium he/she is using—the poetry of radical artifice takes upon itself the task of including in its discourse "the foreignness/& unabsorbability of this plethora of other 'available' material",<sup>11</sup> so as to open up the self to the diverse and diverging voices that make any personal utterance a collaboration.

At this point, I would like to loop back and suggest that this conception of selfhood—the self as artifact—is not so far removed from the lyrical conception of the self as it might seem at first sight. Not surprisingly along this line, the first issue of the French annual poetic journal *Revue de littérature générale*, edited by Olivier Cadiot and Pierre Alféri, was entitled "La mécanique lyrique," fusing traditional opposites by trying to look at the rhetoricity of the lyrical self<sup>12</sup>. Paradoxically, then, those poets who foreground the necessarily collective nature of poetic utterance (the

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Group, for instance) and poets who, on the other hand, work in the personal mode without sacrificing it to the ideology of the 'natural look,' might not be so widely different from each other. And in fact, as Bob Perelman has argued in his recent book, it is high time we listened to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers as individual poets rather than as a collective (frightening) entity<sup>13</sup>. For, have not the truly lyrical poets, be they in the Dickinson or in the Whitman tradition, always been aware of the artificiality of their 'voice'? Perloff herself, as she takes the example of that arch-confessional poet Robert Lowell, whose lyricsm is unquestionable (if somewhat skewed), is rather hard put to recognize that Lowell's 'natural look' was "cunningly contrived," aware as he was of his 'representative' and 'singular' position in the world of poetry. Indeed, it seems to me that to posit a monolithic self which poetic discourse should eschew as being dangerously blind to its ideological implications is to misrepresent the lyrical self. It is to take the lyrical self for what it never was—i.e., the unified ideal of the Cartesian cogito—and to forget that as soon as it is voiced in a poem, this self is always already broken up into tiny fragments, that indeed the lyric 'voice' is nothing but the rhapsodic stitching together of those irreconcilable fragments. That the seams should show is itself a lyric necessity, as Maulpoix brilliantly shows elsewhere:

*Le sujet lyrique [...] se diffracte et se révèle aventureusement, au sein d'un réseau de figures qui transforment et multiplient ses traits. [...] Il n'est pas un, mais multiple, aléatoire, tel un nœud inextricable de contradictions, ou tel un lieu optique dans l'œil duquel le monde entier se constelle. [...] De même que Narcisse est inséparable d'Echo, le sujet n'a pas d'existence lyrique hors de la multiplication des éclats de sa voix. Une autre, la poésie, parle à sa place, et de travers. Elle change le " je " en " tu " et dramatise sa présence. Elle l'enveloppe de rumeurs qui sont comme les morceaux de son intégrité perdue, les fragments d'une Parole impossible. [...] Si " la poésie est toujours un vocatif ", c'est d'abord qu'elle appelle le sujet à la présence et fait advenir dans le langage sa figure et son existence toujours aléatoire.<sup>14</sup>*

What I am trying to imply here is the necessity, in poetic writing, for a centrifugal movement on both sides, away from the dead center of the 'natural look' as it is expressed in the confessional mode—the collective joining the personal on the common margins of dissenting writing. "The direction of poetic interest," writes Charles Bernstein, "can better be directed outward, centrifugally, to the unknown and the peripheral, than toward a constant centripetal regrouping and reshoring through official verse culture's enormously sophisticated mechanism of tokenization that targets, splits off, and decontextualizes; essentializing the mode of difference and incorporating the product (never the process) into its own cultural space."<sup>15</sup>

In other words, I do think that *formal dissent is increasingly becoming a form of lyricism in American poetry today*, a lyricism in which the poetic self must, as she/he acknowledges her (his) artificiality, accept to redefine her (his) boundaries and the possibilities of her (his) experience. I sense that this is what poets like Rae Armantrout and Mei Mei Berssenbrugge, for instance, are doing, drawing from both the rhapsodic and self-parodic lyricism of John Ashbery's late work and the high, also self-parodic, formalism of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. Probably one of the best instances of such personal involvement in a highly formalist structure is Lyn Hejinian's now classic text *My Life*, a text in which the very artificial mode of composition, implying multiple centers of consciousness, is made to cohere (are made to co-hear) thanks to a permanent calling into question of—but not doing away with—the connection between 'my' and 'life.'<sup>16</sup> In this long text(s), a first-person self welcomes her artificiality as the way of expanding 'the personal' to limits that had not been reached before; in doing so, Hejinian subtly shifts the relationship between the self as writing subject and the self as written object. Far from being a mere sleight of hand, the fact that the age of the author determines both the number of sections in the book and the number of sentences in each section is the proof that the 'author's life' is presented as a process rather than as a product of selfhood. It is this kind of reconfiguration of the first person, and consequently of the lyrical persona, that seems to me an interesting direction for poetry to go into.

## Notes

1. Jean-Michel Maulpoix, "La quatrième personne du singulier," in Dominique Rabaté, dir. *Figures du sujet lyrique* (Paris: PUF, "Perspectives Littéraires", 1996) 157, 160.
2. Rae Armantrout, *Necromance* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1991) 19. For a further analysis of this text, see my article "Form as Freedom in the Poetry of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Group," forthcoming this winter from Lodz University Press.
3. Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1991) 35. In a note, Perloff acknowledges the presence of dissenting voices as early as the 1960s, notably John Ashbery's.
4. Charles Bernstein, "The Only Utopia Is in a Now," *The Sophist* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987) 35.
5. Certainly, Mikhaïl Bakhtin's conception of poetic language as devoid of all dialogic dimension—in spite of the fact that, in Bakhtin's own culture and time, there existed such experimental works as Velimir Khlebnikov's zaum poetry—is typical of the idealization of poetic Voice, both in poetry and poetics, until a fairly recent date. "Dans les genres poétiques", Bakhtin writes, "la dialogisation

naturelle du discours n'est pas utilisée littérairement, le discours se suffit à lui-même et ne présume pas, au-delà de ses limites, les énoncés d'autrui. Le style poétique est conventionnellement aliéné de toute action réciproque avec le discours d'autrui, tout « regard » vers le discours d'un autre." M. Bakhtin, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, trad. du russe par D. Olivier (Paris: Gallimard, tel, 1978), 107.

6. Ron Padgett, "Voice," quoted in Andrei Codrescu, ed. *Up Late: American Poetry Since 1970* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1987) 117.
7. Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, op. cit. 43.
8. Rae Armantrout, *Necromance*, op. cit. 39.
9. Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, op. cit. 47.
10. George Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 35.
11. Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption," *A Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992) 40.
12. *Revue de littérature générale* 1 (Paris: P.O.L., 1995).
13. Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996).
14. Jean-Michel Maulpoix, *Le regard d'Orphée : essais sur le lyrisme* (Paris: José Corti, 1989) 183-4, 188.
15. Charles Bernstein, "State of the Art," *A Poetics*, op. cit. Note how the spatial metaphor of the margin inevitably points to the relationship existing between the formal disruptions ('centrifugal' forces) within the poems themselves on the one hand—especially syntactic disruptions defamiliarizing discourse—and on the other hand, the formal disruption caused within the 'syntax of genres,' poetry's definition being the movement towards the margins of any genre poetry finds itself caught in.
16. Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987), expanded edition. The phrase 'expanded edition' is not in vain, since the book's architectural principle is that it contains as many sections as the author's years, and as many sentences in each section as well. Consequently, the first edition of *My Life* (1978) contained 37 sections of 37 sentences (Hejinian was born in 1941), while the 1987 edition has 45 sections of 45 sentences. Sentences in each section have not simply been added at the end but woven into the previous text, thus creating a new text that has been expanded from within.

## *A Tentative Map of Contemporary American Poetry*

BOB PERELMAN\*

There is no procedure that I know of that would enable me to give you an efficiently abbreviated map of the contemporary state of American poetry. Every gesture of abbreviation is also, in at least equal measure, one of distortion. I'll be using terms like "language writing," "identity poetry," "spoken word" or "performance poetry." But there are no terribly useful generic laws unifying the members of these loose sets; there are only social, libidinal, semi-contradictory links—I could bring together fuzzy logic and hypertext linkages and say "fuzzy linkages." This fact doesn't make class insignificant or literary groupings unimportant—the isolated artist belongs to one of the most carefully defined literary groups. But at the same time there's quite a bit of play, tension, cross purposeful activity within groupings. One bit of persistent misinformation in the 70's and 80's in the American poetry scene was that language writers were a cadre of ideological bureaucrat-zealots intent on establishing and then policing the poetic revolution.

In such a fuzzily linked world, generalizations are sites of, not quite betrayals, but reversals, corrections, running after a number of buses at once. Language writers are supposed to be against narrative. But from what I've seen, the novelists here experience severe discomfort with the limitations of straight narrative, while I who am nominally a language writer, find it a crucial social and thus a crucial poetic device. I'll tell some little stories of the conference before this. It will give you a bit of a window

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onto a partial view of the American poetry scene. No word buttons will be furnished; you will not be able to click onto other areas—until my talk is finished, that is.

Last week I was at a conference in Rutgers called “Poetry and the Public Sphere.” It’s easy enough to joke about the public sphere—with each passing decade, jihad, genocide, political campaign, Habermas’s notion of an area of rational interchange looks more and more chimerical: if there is a public sphere it is neither rational nor round nor does access to it seem particularly public. And then of course, the conventional cynicism has it that whatever the public spaces in the United States, there is no poetry in them.

But in fact there were a number of fairly large publics at this conference. Amiri Baraka, Miguel Algarin, Sonia Sanchez, and poets from the Nuyorican Café drew a crowd of about 750; and the next night the audience for Adrienne Rich’s reading was a bit smaller, but not much. Many of the same people attended both readings, but the feel of the audiences was quite different. The Nuyoricans were received like rock stars—the MC would build up to their names and then there would be prolonged cheering as he pronounced them; and cheers followed their poems. It felt like these poems were extensions of their careers rather than autonomous objects; but perhaps such an observation could be made about almost any poetry reading. It’s hard to recreate a sense of the poems. Some were picaresque sex narratives; wit built onto recognizable riffs. It was nice to see verbal display attracting such enthusiastic attention from the young; though all the subject positions were quite uncomplicated. One twenty-year-old woman read a poem made up entirely of sex ads from the *Village Voice* personals; people laughed at the funny variations of store bought desire: femme blonde, petite, seeks large butch cook for lavish meals, etc. One could see this poetic glass as half empty and say that this was merely narcissistic recognition; or one could see the glass as half full and say that this laughter displayed widespread recognition of the complex way that subjects were put together out of multiplicitous parts. Baraka’s reading was a bit different; while his rhetoric was populist-oral, his political commitments were quite straightforwardly communist—a communism that applies to the black community in Newark, New Jersey; not to the Place de la République. His last poem went something like this—a crude reconstruction, but I remember the final rhetorical turn:

*We won't have enough money all our lives. Our jobs, if we have jobs, will be doing something we never want to do. Our pleasures will be degraded and intermittent. Our children will have a tough time surviving if the cops don't kill them first. They will probably have a worse life than we do—unless we make revolution.*

Baraka's "we" was utterly without ambiguity. It was all the more effective because of this. Polysemy is fine in some circumstances; but for poetry to work in forming and energizing groups in society, the less the better. For many poets, and certainly for me, at times, this is an unpalatable thought.

Adrienne Rich's reading was quite a bit different. Her poems were very well crafted, careful verbal nuance that would register to an audience used to Auden, Lowell, and Eliot; coherent series of images; inescapable ethical didactics at all points. But the poems were also of an order that is welcome in every mainstream anthology in America. The last line of her reading went something like this: poetry doesn't make revolution happen, but it makes the need for revolution apparent.

So, what about these revolutions? And how does language writing fit into these arenas? I was on a panel with Rich, and four women—all feminist writers: Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Alicia Ostriker, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Meena Alexander. Rich described language writing as something like a monkey wrench thrown into the oppressive system of administered language; and she was more or less sympathetic toward its displays of non-syntactic, non-semantic language, but she felt that finally there was no political efficacy in such activity. I wanted to make it clear to her that such an image of language writing was very much a received idea. I've heard versions of this idea a couple of times yesterday at the conference, as well as many other places. It comes from a number of well-circulated critical statements from early in the coalescence of the language writing scene where syntactic breaks were equated with social change. What follows was an attempt to make that idea more useful.

While progress seems a suspect term, Victorian, colonialist, evangelical—nevertheless, literary change and history happen. Poets might as well think about the overly large task of taking part in these changes, both of poetry and society, in whatever complex order necessary to deal with the two things at the same time. Poetries such as Baraka's and Rich's have made it obvious to many just how partial universal subjects are. Poets have to—get to—pay real attention to the pleasurable, threatening, shameful, naked, excitingly coded facts of other bodies.

I want to read a poem from a series called "Fake Dreams." I was awake when I wrote it, and the events narrated are written events only; nevertheless, it is about changes that I hope we can all be interested in. It will touch on Wordsworth, bathroom graffiti, the erotic and the anti-erotic sides of history, decorum and pleasure.

*Fake Dream*

*January 28: We were going to  
have sex in the stacks. We*

were in the 800's, standing eagerly  
amid the old copies of the

Romantics. Looking at the dark blue  
spines of Wordsworth's Collected, I thought

how the intensity of his need  
to express his unplaced social being

in sentences had produced publicly verifiable  
beauty so that his subsequent civic

aspirations seemed to have importance enough  
for him to become Poet Laureate

and how his later leaden writing  
upheld that intensity and verifiability, only

instead of searching wind and rocks  
and retina for the sentences of

his social being, he chirped his  
confirmed lofty perch to other social

beings in lengthy claustrophobic hallelujahs for  
the present moment. There are devices

to keep it still, long enough,  
and he had learned them. Rhyme

was a burden, crime was unambiguously,  
explainably wrong, time had snuck around

behind him. He had carved his  
own anxiety into a throne and

now he was stuck on it,  
remembering sadder days when he had

wanted to be happy with a  
purity that made him blink, thinking

back. He could hardly look: his  
past seemed unbearably happy. Our own

more slippery, contrapuntal hallelujahs were planted  
in the immediate future, only a

*few buttons, zippers and a little  
elastic down the road. We had*

*first snuck into the men's room  
but it had been crowded with*

*two intensely separated men hunched at  
urinals 1 and 6. We turned*

*to hurry out, and you pointed  
to the magic marker graffiti on*

*the beige tiles: "This place needs  
a women's touch" answered by "FINGER*

*MY ASSHOLE, CUNT!" This second message  
had been modified by an arrow*

*indicating "CUNT" was to be moved  
from behind to before "ASSHOLE": "FINGER*

*MY CUNT, ASSHOLE!" We were eager  
to prove syntax was not mere*

*vanity and that bodies could use  
it to resist the tyranny of*

*elemental words. And wouldn't it be  
nice to get knowledge and pleasure*

*on the same page. So we'd  
hurried out to the deserted 800's.*

My brief commentary: this is a fake dream, like the title says. But the various writing situations are true to the present. Wordsworth was almost a democratic poet, almost an avant-gardist; for many readers he embodied a flexible self not beholden to inherited class horizons. But he achieved this at the cost of an idealized Nature, mute and female, and of an infantilized sister (I'm referring to her image in his poems, not the person Dorothy). And at the end of his career he was writing sonnet sequences justifying capital punishment. The Wordsworthian self, universal subject poised against nature, is still widely available in many poems.

For most poets writing is closer to a graffiti situation than to the canonized pages of the Collected Wordsworth. Our pages are not pristine, they're scrawled over with prior social messages. And from the vantage of the men's room, the snarl of shame, rage, threats of violence is all too

familiar. Despite the poem's humor and its messing around with narrative probabilities, I'm very serious about the need to resist the tyranny of elemental words. What are elemental words? Jew? Serb? Woman? God? Cunt? Nature? Language? Poetry? All of these—none of these: it depends. I think they're words that brook no argument, that are intended to be outside of syntax and thus outside of history. I have to resist these when I write. So I'm all for that third graffitist—a man? a woman? gay? straight—who drew the arrows and took over the male rage position and critiqued it, mocked it, undid it. Please don't get me wrong: FINGER MY CUNT, ASSHOLE! is in no way an answer, a useful social slogan. It is a poem, as are the other graffitos. But I'll stand by that person's gesture of undoing the elemental words, the oppressor's language, the male threat—elemental words are always a threat, to whoever's outside their beneficence. It is a pleasure to resist those threats.