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number twelve

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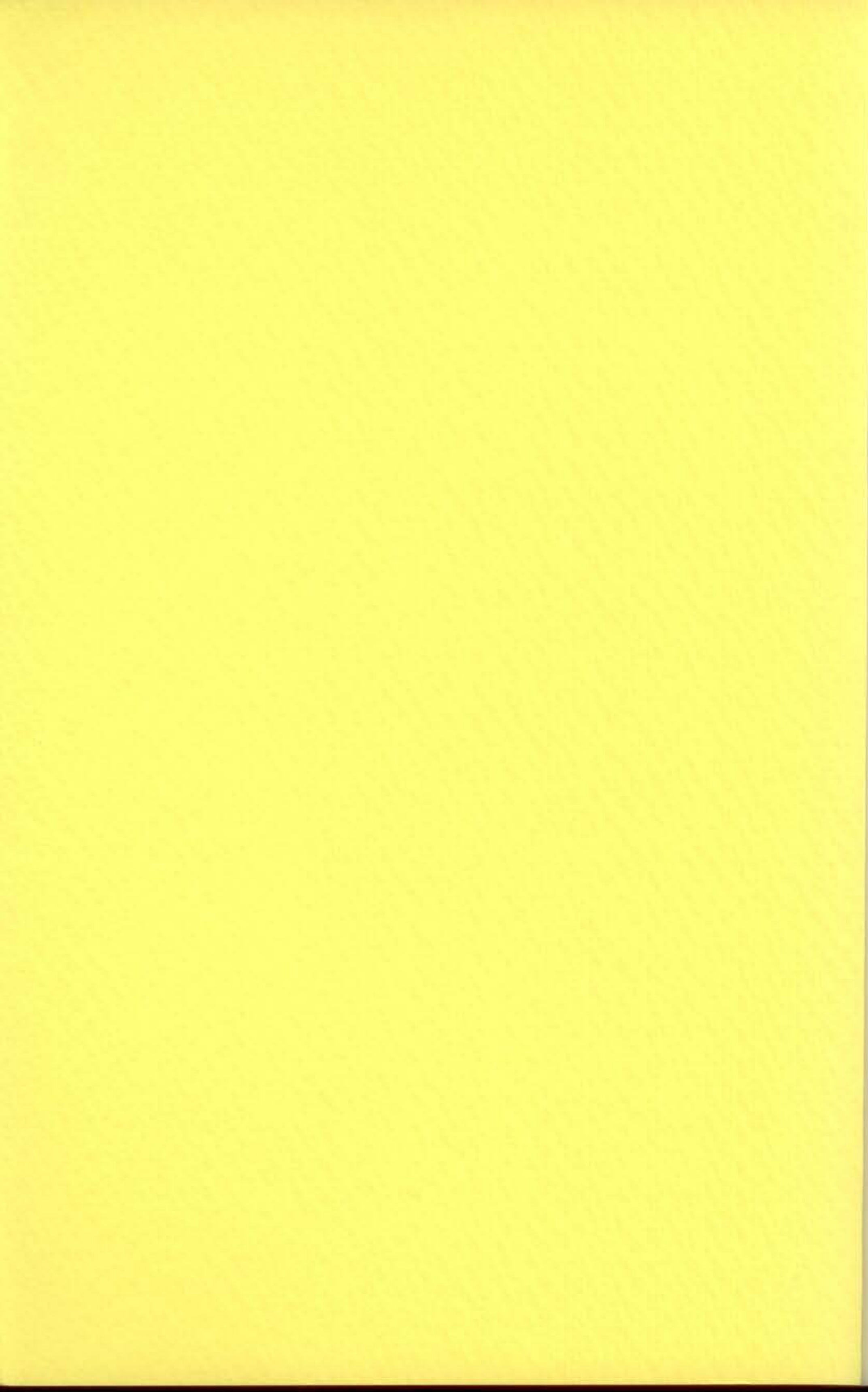

line

number twelve

A Journal of Contemporary Writing
and its Modernist Sources

fall 1988

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As a journal published in co-operation with The Contemporary Literature Collection, *Line* will reflect the range of the collection. Contents will be related to the line of post-1945 Canadian, American, and British writers whose work issues from, or extends, the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

bpNichol
30 September 1944 — 25 September 1988

All of us at *Line* were deeply saddened by the sudden death of bpNichol, Barrie Phillip Nichol, whose writing and daily living—and daily caring for others—carried the very heart, consciousness and energy of the most vital literary practice going on in this country. bp, always the first to welcome and encourage new literary ventures, wholeheartedly supported *Line* right from our beginnings. His visual commentary on Stein's *Ida* in the first issue still stands out as a thoroughly engaging reader's approach to a writer who meant so much to him. Our own critical involvement with his long poem *The Martyrology* led to *Tracing the Paths: Reading ≠ Writing The Martyrology*. This special issue (Number 10, Fall 1987), co-published with Talonbooks, brought together new critical writing on *The Martyrology* and new writing by bp. It was the kind of collaboration between readers and writer that only bp, always game for a challenge, could transform into an exciting venture—a companionship. Barrie was a dear friend and a poetic genius. His gift for words was utterly magical. God, we will miss his playfulness, his seriousness, his "puncertainty," his curiosity, his voice—speaking and writing—and his humanity.

---

death you enter the poem as you always do
— disruptor

whatever the order or structure
we must reckon you in
a sum

cuts across
some vision of perfection we cling to

(from *The Martyrology: Book 6 Books*)

* * *

For this issue *Line* features two essay/commentaries, Judith Roche on H.D., and Miriam Nichols on Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser . . . Roche's "Myrrh: A Study of Persona in H.D.'s *Trilogy*" is a shortened and revised version of her M.A. thesis written at the New College of California . . . Nichols' "A Poetry of Hell" is from her Ph.D. dissertation "American Orphic" completed at York University ; her limited edition chapbook *Common Pathologies* is available from Fissure Books (#1-441 McLean Drive, Vancouver, B.C., V5L 3M5).

Fred Wah sends us further installments of his continuing series of critical meditations. Numbers 1 - 69 were published in *Music at the Heart of Thinking* available from Red Deer College Press; his *Waiting for Saskatchewan* from Turnstone Press received the 1985 Governor General's

Award for Poetry . . . Lola Tostevin's most recent book *'Sophie* was published by Coach House Press . . . Bruce Whiteman's *The Invisible World Is in Decline, Books I-IV* is forthcoming from Coach House Press . . . Benjamin Hollander and David Levi Strauss have collaborated on a number of editorial projects for their journal ACTS, among these an impressive issue on Jack Spicer, *A Book of Correspondences for Jack Spicer* (Number 6, 1987) . . . Robin Blaser's latest book of poems *Pell Mell* is available from Coach House Press . . . Louis Dudek sent us selections from his *Notebooks* only a few days before we went to press (watch for more selections in the next issue); two books of his have just been published, a selected poems, *Infinite Worlds* (edited by Robin Blaser) from Véhicule Press and *In Defense of Art: Critical Essays & Reviews* from Quarry Press.

The forthcoming issue of *Line* will feature a major section on the writing of Daphne Marlatt, guest edited by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli.

New Year
RM

AS IF BY CHANCE

the Private Sector worries me
it can, the ubiquitous "they" say, solve—that is, clear up—

the economy, which, at the upper level called economics—that
is, confused science and confused theology prancing around
together as usual, is under the cultural, like oil or gas
under the hood or roof, and unpredictably disappearing
from under us

and the political, which, by manipulation, is over the stunned
polis, in order to manage production, distribution and
consumption of wealth, becomes political economy—thus,
what is under becomes what is over, and *vice versa*, to
define a reality without earth or sky which are cultural
habitudes

and the cultural, which—not limited by high, low or middling—
is conflict around the creation of reality, and may be
invisible as thought is, and is neither formulaic—bonded
like chemicals—nor nostalgic which is a dangerous and
transcendent condition, having forgotten that
transcendence like ourselves is historical, even in dreams

and the social, which is struggle against dominations and powers,
the society of which is recently made up of those who
were not previously there

and mass culture, which is new, misunderstood and ungenerous
about historical consciousness, mirrors privacies that
dissolve in soap, and is jubilant from which sorrow may
learn

and democracy, which is recent, unAthenian, unPeriklean,
incomplete, and by nature unstable and creative

and the sexual, which is the passionate body of all chemicals

and our ethos, which is the behaviour of one to another, near and
far—many to many defines character—and *is* visible—
not, as the dictionary tells us, "the moral, ideal, or

universal element in a work of art as distinguished from
that which is emotional or subjective"—[WOW! dissolve
that and *ethos* becomes action—which is to say,
character for the sake of the action—and *pathos* is there
among kindnesses]

and the universal, which is absent from twentieth-century
thought, according to the *poesis* afoot

and technology, which has wild arms, and is human nature
unaware of itself

and the angels, who become 'isms and hierarchies to materialize
the real of things we're thrown against as we become
startled sub-jects—to which I ob-ject

and religion, which, dismissed from the plain of thought,
gathers godhead in small envelops of cement, where on
the postage changes

and human survival, which, with all its adjectival ironies,
proposes a social inheritance

and the good, which we know as Goodness!, an expletive,
something added to fill up the whole that has nothing to
do with it, and which is fragile and our own composition

and love, which is true attention to whatever and sometimes
some one

and friendship, which is guidance in every attention

the Private Sector economizes hither and yon, as it was
past participant in bereavement and deprivation, as it is
now a relationship between privies *with the exception
of an infinitely distant point, as mathematicians
say, the world as such*
(from Castoriadis)

INTERLUNAR thoughts

"Advertizing tells us who we are" and
"presents a completely integrated culture"

in the interval between the old moon and the new
when the moon is invisible, one hopes . . . .

the moon will show up:

capitalism, racism, consumerism,
homophobia, sexism — all of them systems
of *signifiers detached from spirit* so
the governing soul goes
numb

(a voice on CBC and words by
John Wilkinson on John Weiners)

IMAGE-NATION 23 (imago-mundi

the smile of public art—only a possibility—and its curious
frowns delight in the dissolution of a public world and
yes, there are academic and private difficulties, each one
thinking of ownerships, specialties, furnitures as publicities
in a public world—these, alongside popular arts which disappear
into kissables and similar rhythms still, one and another
do think of it, not quite outwitted by the dissolution of

IMAGO MUNDI
SCULPTURED THOUGHT

and dear mundane images

Duchamp thought of a
large glass, its transparency tinted by bachelors and
bride, wasp, sex cylinder, desire-magneto with
artificial sparks, at the horizon where her clothing might
be put on or off, according to the juggler of gravity—the
most necessary character who does not appear because he is
unpainted—and the boxing match just to the right of the
scissors, drainage slopes, sieves, oculist witnesses,
pump, chute, weight of holes, planes of flow,
splash, falls, dins, crashes beside a chocolate
grinder, and above it all a climatic blossoming
and milky way

we see through a window cut
out of the wall for this occasion a pause or *bedazzlement*,
just where *the word modern has run out scareely as long ago*
as yesterday form opens, space opens and time
dapples this public *ritual of absence* turning on itself to become
a necessity of meaning, the *eros* of chances among things and
their *signs which are movable parts of the syntax*
dazed
in *the circularity of desire and thought*
we see through

and Brancusi thought of it, surfaces which are depths
brought to light and shadow, Eve and Plato flickering
side by side they are likely thinking eternity, which
is to say indefinition and he placed an *Endless Column*,
a *Gate of the Kiss* and a *Table of Silence* in Roumania for
the simple reason that he was born there birthplace is his
intermingling
of what is ours and what belongs to the world

sur-face,

over and under the form   time and space are a vulnerable
love, a project of thinking *something whose very nature*
is to be in need   we have called this abstraction, merely
a style to rebel against the obedience of definition, but
archaeologists remind us that the arts encompassing Homer's
logomachia were abstract   his word-fight to the finish
and small line-figures soon to appear around the neck of
an amphora,

willingly thinking from indefinition

and Isamu Noguchi, d. Dec. 30, 1988, thought of it—*Time*
magazine headlines the "passing of a purist"—pure from
what? as he sought the *truth of materials*   *The Great Rock*
of Inner Seeking stands there at the entrance in
Washington, an *invasion of a different time* into the
space of the rock—inner and outer bare to the rock—
craving a certain morphologic quality of *anti-monuments*

which, in this picture-show, flashes us back to the sights of
an-other worldly study of how to shape realities   where he began
with Idaho-born Gutzon Borghum who carved the Presidential
heads on Mt. Rushmore—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln
and stopped with that hoot Teddy Roosevelt who in New York
is on horseback with a black man and an Indian on either side,
walking, of course, bronzed to the core, before
coming to squalor and us

"My first sculpture," he said, "was Oscar Wilde's Salome, then I
did Jesus Christ. I would say I was extremely facile." and then
flash forward, in the midst of the question of images and watching
Brancusi, "It became self-evident to me that in abstraction lay the
expression of the age"—"to ignore man as an object of special
veneration"—not a mere characteristic of modernism, but to work
by "this reversal the unthought" truth of materials and Buckminster
Fuller talked him into painting the disused laundry room silver—
floor, walls and ceiling—freeing the distinctions   and Martha Graham
said, "It is not abstract except if you think of orange juice as an
abstraction of an orange—He's caught up in the happenings of the
universe."

strolling through the darkness, the earth, the playgrounds,
the white marble garden at Yale, the flowing pool of heaven
in Tokyo, the sunken garden (Chase Manhattan), the bridges
in Hiroshima, by the rejected, though he was in a "relocation"
camp during the war, memorial for the *atomic dead*, called by
the small Radio Nurse, bakelite and commercial, among Akari,

mulberry paper and bamboo illuminations at floor level, through
the UNESCO garden, East and West sparkling in Paris, the whoosh
and splendour of the Detroit fountain, the tipped red cube, which
he said was "man's fate," right there in front of the Marine Midland
Bank, the magic circle, never closed, Persian travertine, so it is
endless, ah, Double Red Mountain, and nearer to home, across the border
the Black Sun (Volunteer Park, Seattle) to look through

and outward

marigold, daisies and broom   anti-monuments

towards *a greater chaos*

and a new equilibrium   *art is an element in assymmetrical*
flux   *no isolated object*

all function, all linkage

to our birthplace and back again

WHO'S THERE?

the room talks to itself

coloured Persian

and wraps its thinking-

lights around

the man bent over

a drinking-fountain

who is black

and white

who transliterates

into one couching

over his book

of loose pages

and another clapping

his hands and pointing

his toe

playing musical chairs

and chances

among deep-seated minds

whose laughter counter-

points the razzle

of crows outside

cawing down the chimney

as if to enter between

firecat-andiron's

serious, childish, jasper eyes

the room talking to itself

MIRIAM NICHOLS

The Poetry of Hell: Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan

1. American Graffiti

In American literature, the open road promises "grace of the imagination" and a bridge between what Emerson called the "me" and "not-me"—Whitman's "long brown path" or Crane's "inviolate curve" stretching between now and then, here and there, or the inside and outside of things. By the 1950s, however, when Berkeley writers Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan were in the process of developing a poetics, the end of the road had already been announced. As Spicer observes of Whitman,

> In his world roads go somewhere and you walk with someone whose hand you can hold. I remember. In my world roads only go up and down and you are lucky if you can hold on to the road or even know that it is there. (*ONS* 81)

Just five years before Spicer published *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, Jack Kerouac had run his beatnik heroes all the way to the road's end in the Pacific Ocean and back again to Time Square in New York City. The Whitmanic dream of going somewhere—to "the ragged promised land, the fantastic end of America" as Kerouac puts it—ends there, along with the American text as such, whether conceived as manifest destiny, or as an apocalyptic vision of "the pit and prunejuice of poor beat life itself" (70, 164). Without faith or vision, Kerouac's beatniks can only look forward to "the forlorn rags of growing old" (254). In *Heads of the Town*, Spicer takes the only road left to him, the one that can go up, or down to an underworld. As he says in *A Textbook of Poetry*, "It was the first metaphor they invented when they were too tired to invent a universe. The steps. The way down. The source of a river (182)."

It is this vanishing point, where the road turns into a verticality and hell becomes a real possibility for poetic life in San Francisco, California, that Robert Duncan would redeem with a mythology of language. In his 1955 Preface to *Caesar's Gate*, Duncan defines hell as "a forfeiting of the goods of the intellect. It is all that is not terror: the nostalgias, sophistications, self-debasements here, that are the voice of a soul-shriveling, the ironies of mediocrity" (xlv.) Hell is the absence of vision. Duncan's struggle in *Caesar's Gate* is with "the desolation of the

uncreated"—or to use the metaphor which inspires the title of this book, he sees in American culture an Asian wasteland to be conquered. Duncan follows the road up, to a mythical life in language that saves him from the "forlorn rags" of an exhausted imagination. Life and language are analogues in Duncan's organicist poetics, and once beyond the impasse of *Caesar's Gate* the field opens. In the Preface of 1972 which accompanies the Sand Dollar version of these poems, Duncan looks back on this book, *Letters* and *The Book of Resemblances* as

> . . . works of a phase in Poetry fearfully and with many errors making its way, taking up fear and error as its own terms, seeking every rumor, every superstition, every promise of its own existence as it journeyed into the continent of that existence, seeking to regain a map in the actual to come to know, part by part, the transformation of a continent into life. *"So that there is a continent of feeling beyond our feeling, / a big house of the spirit,"* as it came to me in the poem "Apprehensions" some ten years later. (xii)

Duncan's roads always exist within a "made place," and this fictional language field "restores / health to the land" (*OF* 10). There is no poetry of hell because poetry is that which gets the poet out of hell.

For different reasons, there is little in Robin Blaser's *oeuvre*, either, that could be called a poetry of hell. When he speaks of his poetics in cosmological terms, Blaser draws upon the metaphysical tradition of light. In his "Metaphysics of Light," he discusses the analogy between light and intelligence as a way of imagining the doubleness of being. Light is intellect, but it is also a physical substance: the *mundus* is within the mundane. From Dante, Blaser takes the idea that light mediates between matter and consciousness:

> The positive is something like the nature of light, the opposite of which would be the sheer negation of darkness. Second, as the fundamental form of body as such, light is the substantial form of the universe and provides the universe with its principle of continuity. And third, it is the noblest of corporeal things and has an intermediate place between body and soul, matter and spirit, and we are back with the three, the trichotomy. When you get the cosmology going in Dante, it turns out that light is the central principle that works for that intermediate thing. (57)

Light is a bridge, and Blaser's roads are two-way streets. The position he favors is neither the hell of the sheerly material, nor the mythical paradiso of the text, but an intermediate world that must not be conceived in terms of an "either/or" but of "both/and." Explaining the significance of light as a metaphor (and he says, "with the interiorization of

language, experience in language . . . the metaphor becomes real"), Blaser argues the worldliness of the term:

> But the business of using a visible light and not differentiating a light that is other than the visible light means that you've turned the world into God. And my vocabulary moves toward this all the time . . . . (59)

In this discussion of light, Blaser locates Spicer within the same metaphorical structures he uses to describe his own poetics. However, Spicer's preoccupation with the *experience* of desire ("he is our greatest love poet," Blaser says), leads him into a different kind of bridge game. As Spicer plays it, there *seems* to be "something" at either end of the bridge, a "something" withheld by the sentence we must suffer. The road should go somewhere. That is what roads are for. The language should give us what it promises: it should represent, make visible real objects, transubstantiate matter into words. The metaphor should do its job of bridging the gap between visibilities and the world of intelligence, memory, the "X" of the future. In *Billy the Kid*, "The roads going somewhere. You can almost see where they are going beyond the dark purple of the horizon (79)." Almost. But Spicer adds, "Not even the birds know where they are going." Where the road disappears, into the surf breaking in Aquatic Park at the end of North Beach in San Francisco, the gulls scream their hunger.

In his Vancouver Lectures, Spicer says that the three books of *Heads of the Town* (*Homage to Creeley, A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud*, and *A Textbook of Poetry*), correspond to the hell, purgatory, and heaven of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but he adds that "through the whole book runs the business of the pathway down into hell" (186). Given Spicer's post-Saussurian linguistics, the way down can occur anywhere on the vertical (paradigmatic) axis of language, where pronouns are shifters and language becomes a system of differences. On this axis, identity cannot be conceptualized as a thing in-itself. Spicer knew this long before he wrote *Heads*, but in *Homage to Creeley* he performs the recognition. "For example," he says, in "They Came to the Briars . . . ," "The poem does not know / Who you refers to" (123). And in the "commentary" to this poem (*Homage* is literally divided into an above and a below, a text and a commentary), he adds, by way of explanation, "In hell it is difficult to tell people from other people."

The tension in *Heads of the Town* comes from the intersection of this vertical road, with the horizontal (syntagmatic) axis of language. Conventional syntax seems to offer an order, define relationships, distinguish subjects from objects. But to be a subject is to be subjected to the entire code, its vertical hell as well as its lucid paradiso. Or in Spicer's terms, the paradiso merely conceals a hell of nonsense, where syntax falls apart and meaning disappears into the Whorfian machinery of the system. The distinction Spicer makes between language and its speakers,

or living organisms and "dead" subjects, finds its best figuration in "The Territory Is Not The Map":

> What is a half-truth the lobster declared
> You have sugared my groin and have sugared my hair
> What correspondence except my despair?
> What is my crime but my youth?
>
> Truth is a map of it, oily eyes said
> Half-truth is half of a map instead
> Which you will squint at until you are dead
> Putting to sea with the the [sic] truth. (122)

The concept of truth is itself produced by the system, and yet this truth is ours insofar as consciousness involves an internalization of linguistic structures. This is the sweetness of language in which we may be trapped ("You have sugared my groin . . ."). The lobster protests his innocence in vain. His crime is precisely his "youth," or what Spicer calls the "absolutely temporary" (*ONS* 45). The lobster is up against a system which, to borrow Blaser's vocabulary, is "older and other than ourselves" ("SM" 61). The live, fleshly territory that the lobster would like to appear is as unmarkable (and unremarkable) as the sea. "Oily eyes," whose gaze slides off the surface of things because the "reality" behind appearances cannot be brought to light, is adamant. If truth is a map, then a half-truth is half of a map. No amount of squinting at the map will reveal the territory.

In his commentary to this poem—and the "commentaries" of Homage parody those of traditional hermeneutical exegesis—Spicer says, "This is a poem to prevent idealism—i.e. the study of images" (122). For Spicer's Imagist predecessors (Pound, H.D.), an image was a condensed complex of meanings (a vortex), closer to Duncan's allusive mytho-linguistics than to Spicer's insistence on the formal properties of language. However, the poem cannot prevent idealism because the Poet (capital "P") still thinks of himself as "oily eyes." He can't escape the image, and images turn out to be another form of the nomination that "subjects" him. What the poet can do, though, is dispel the misconception that the image tells the truth about the "absolutely temporary." On roads that only go up and down, the car, supposedly designed to traverse the impossible distance between territory and map, actually goes nowhere.

Spicer's *Homage to Creeley* is exactly that—an homage—and not just to Creeley, but to an entire line of American thought. The irony of this tribute lies in Spicer's implicit opposition to his literary masters, an opposition which comes in part from his rethinking of metaphor. Michael Davidson has noted the similarity between Creeley's "I Know a Man" and Spicer's "Dash": both poems are metaphors of metaphor. The

problem for Creeley is how to drive and retain an awareness of the vehicle at the same time:

> . . . John, I
>
> sd, which was not his
> name, the darkness sur-
> rounds us, what
>
> can we do against
> it, or else, shall we &
> why not, buy a goddamn big car,
>
> drive, he sd, for
> christ's sake, look
> out where yr going (38)

The tension in this poem, Davidson says, comes from "producing abstract solutions to problems having mortal consequences" (110). Contemplation of the car prevents the poet from seeing where he is going. Creeley frequently occupies himself with the gap between reflection and perception: his poems move toward a perceptual mode in which the pre-determinations of conceptual thought are left behind. In "Robert Creeley's Epistemopathic Path," Harald Mesch remarks that Creeley's poems constitute "an act of renewed conjugation of body and language." The paradoxical aim of this poetry is aimlessness:

> The openness of the senses makes non-intentional inclusion in the world i.e. love, possible: a condition in which the subject finds itself when it is given, but which it cannot attain on its own volition . . . . (76)

Hence Spicer says in the commentary to "Dash," that Creeley "lacks knowledge of the driver's seat" (146).

In "Dash," Spicer, too, speaks against a rhetoric which predetermines perception:

> Damn them,
> All of them,
> That wear beards on the soles of their feet
> That ride cars
> That aren't
> Funny.
> It comes with a rush
> And a gush
> Of feeling
> Everything is in the street

Then they meet
It with their automobiles. (146)

Spicer is allied with Creeley against those who are protected, within their metaphorical cars, against the "gush / Of feeling" and the open street. (Compare Blaser's "The streets are my body," in "For Gustave Moreau," *The Faerie Queene*). "Dash" may be read as a barb directed at Duncan's stated love of rhetoric, or against beat poets like Allen Ginsberg, whom Spicer later accuses of marching "Toward / A necessity which is not love but is a name" (267). But Spicer does not share Creeley's faith in the possibility of a "conjugation of body and language," and it is this disbelief that distinguishes him not just from Creeley, but from Duncan and Olson too. Despite their many differences, Creeley, Duncan and Olson seem to share a feeling for the importance of returning the human animal to its position *in* the world, as a participant in a bio-linguistic continuum. Creeley and Olson, for instance, attempt to free language of the Platonism that separates and privileges a subject over an objectified world. As Olson says in "Projective Verse," "a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages . . ." (24). Spicer would agree, but he does not have Olson's enthusiasm for overhauling the language system—making it "organic" (I am thinking of Olson's head-ear-syllable and heart-breath-line equations). Spicer's language has to remain mechanical, and in opposition to the organism:

Everything is in the street
Then they meet
It with their automobiles.

The car in Olson's "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" is part of the rhetorical garbage to be cleared away, like the psychic debris of a culture that has succeeded in reducing people and things to commodities—"mere equipments" without energy:

I pushed my car, it had been sitting so long unused.
I thought the tires looked as though they only needed air.
But suddenly the huge underbody was above me, and the rear tires
were masses of rubber and thread variously clinging together

as were the dead souls in the living room, gathered
about my mother, some of them taking care to pass
beneath the beam of the movie projector, some record
playing on the victrola, and all of them
desperate with the tawdriness of their life in hell

> I turned to the young man on my right and asked, "How is it, there?" And he begged me protestingly don't ask, we are poor poor. And the whole room was suddenly posters and presentations of brake linings and other automotive accessories, cardboard displays, the dead roaming from one to another
> as bored back in life as they are in hell, poor and doomed
> to mere equipments . . . (205)

The poem, Olson says in "Projective Verse," "is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" (16). Olson's roads go somewhere, if the poet can clear away the "nets we are tangled in." Olson, like Duncan, finds that hell is the loss of intelligence and vision ("They did not complain / of life, they obviously wanted / the movie . . ."), *and* the degradation of vision in false idealisms ("The death in life (death itself) / is endless, eternity / is the false cause"). For Olson, there is a way out of hell. "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" ends with an imperative "Awake, men / awake," and a call for new creativity through poetic "method, method." *Touch* turns "the knot into its own flame," and in the last lines, "The automobile // has been hauled away."

Olson and Creeley offer a new kind of poetic language, and the desire that Spicer makes so palpable can be read as a move toward their incarnationism—the organism revealed in a revitalized discourse, "real objects" in the poem. An homage is in order. But touch is antithetical to Spicer's insistence on distance—on the mechanics of language. The body eventually rots, leaving the rusty frame of the system and a lot of ghosts. Such is the wisdom of hell, that "words / Turn mysteriously against those who use them" (125); that the car cannot be hauled away. In "A Postscript for Charles Olson," Spicer says,

> You are marked
> With a blue tattoo on your arm.
> Rx: Methadrine
> To be taken at 52 miles an hour. (65)

A poet cannot drive fast enough to overtake his own presence, leave his preconceptions in the dust, or escape the markings of the code. In this, Spicer anticipates Derridean deconstruction.

In "White Mythology," Jacques Derrida argues that metaphor, a "trope of resemblance," represents an effort "to bring to knowledge the thing itself" (247). Assuming that "[u]nivocity is the essence, or better the *telos* of language," Derrida finds that metaphor presupposes a nominative (sacred) language: the meaning of the "thing itself" can be reduced to a nameable essence. Metaphor says that sameness underlies difference:

> What *other* than this return of the same is to be found when one seeks metaphor? that is, resemblance? and when one seeks to determine *the dominant* metaphor of a group, which is interesting by virtue of its power to assemble? (266)

Metaphor ultimately involves "an interiorizing anamnesis," and presupposes the possibility of a "reappropriation of literal, proper meaning," or "presence without veil" ("WM" 269, 270). As Derrida describes it, this most common of tropes offers a passage between a physical below and a metaphysical above: metaphor implies essence.

Derrida assumes that metaphor points to a resemblance between the *meaning* of things. Spicer, too, understands metaphor as a "trope of resemblance," and yet the resemblances of hell are not semantic but phonic. Hence "Car Song":

> Away we go with no moon at all
> Actually we are going to hell
> We pin our puns to our back and cross in a car
> The intersections where lovers are.
> The wheel and the road turn into a stair
> The pun at our backs is a yellow star.
> We pin our puns on the windshield like
> We crossed each crossing in hell's despite. (119)

"Star" and "stair," for instance, sound much alike, but the similarity does not resolve itself in univocity. Phonic continuity merely conceals semantic discontinuity. Puns mark the extremity of this paradigmatic dimension of language, and it is via the homophone that Spicer descends to what Blaser describes as "a hell of meaning" ("PO" 281).

In the underworld, language ceases to illuminate. The star, unlike the comforting stars which greet Dante when he emerges from hell, is not a guide to paradise but a mark of terror. "'Yellow stars' are what the Jews wore," Spicer says in his commentary, and terror becomes a passenger in his car. In Cocteau's film *Orpheus*, from which Spicer takes the major figures for *Heads of the Town*, Orpheus rides to hell in a car with Heurtebise, a ghostly chauffeur, Cegeste, a newly dead poet, and the Princess, Lady Death. Cocteau's car belongs to death, and so does Spicer's. The price of the poet's inquiry into the nature of *this* other world is a forced recognition of his own mortality, tossed back at him by the structure of language. The iterability of writing, as Derrida says, marks "a break in presence, 'death,' or the possibility of the 'death' of the addressee . . ." ("SEC" 316). An irreducible difference (*différance*) separates the organism and the code, and the homophone makes a mockery of the originary univocity language seems to promise. Ron Silliman has said of Spicer's poems that typically "coherence and cohesion lie at the surface, masking-while-revealing a deeper chaos below" (175). The homophones in *Heads* open into a chaos of

discontinuities, and sweep away any illusions the poet may have about who is in the driver's seat.

Spicer's distrust of the bridging power of metaphor puts him in symmetrical opposition to the Emerson who dreamt of a transcendental passage between the "me" and "not-me." "Concord Hymn," immediately following "Car Song," refers to a poem by Emerson commemorating the battles of Lexington and Concord. Emerson's poem was written in 1837 to mark the completion of a monument in memory of those Americans who fought for independence: "Here once the embattled farmers stood / And fired the shot heard round the world" (1188). The poem rests on a literary commonplace: poems and monuments can redeem the ephemerality of human doings—"We set to-day a votive stone; / That memory may their dead redeem, / When like our sires, our sons are gone." "'Conquered Him' is a poem by Emerson," Spicer says, and the pun is an ironic comment on the concept of building poems against death, primary foe of our independence. The homophonic concord of Spicer's pun parodies the kind of meaningful concord between language and life that Emerson was after. As Spicer allows the semantic content of the word to disperse in sound, he points to the instability of linguistic monuments.

"Concord Hymn" begins with one of Spicer's edgy jokes:

> Your joke
> Is like a lake
> That lies there without any thought
> And sees
> Dead seas
> The birds fly
> Around there
> Bewildered by its blue without any thought of water
> Without any thought
> Of water (120)

The birds are fooled by the surface resemblance between sky and lake, and this visual pun, like the rather awful phonic pun, "sees" and "seas," blocks their ability to perceive a "deeper chaos below." The joke is on them. "The Dead Seas [or sees] are all in the Holy Land," Spicer adds, and the Holy Land is just what Emerson would have America—a visionary America—be, an Eden in which the difference and distance between perceiver and perceived could be resolved in one poetic uni-verse. Were there such a Holy Land, the poet could recover a metaphysical Origin and all that the Origin implies: a sacred language, resolution of epistemological problems, anamnesis, and redemption from death—roads that go somewhere and metaphorical cars to traverse the gap between The Word and living flesh. But as Spicer says, "when you go away you don't come home" (124). There is no return from this "hell of meaning." The joke is on the poet, too, passenger in a car that is spinning its wheels.

2. From Magic to Surrealism

In Spicer's linguistic hell, as in Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland* or even the shifty underworld of classical mythology, the apparent good sense of representational convention reverses into magic, illusion and nonsense. The vertical road takes the poet ever further down into the formal workings and phonic logic of the language system. Like rabbits popping out of a hat, invisible words suddenly materialize to stubbornly assert their independence, while take-it-for-granted visibilities, like skies and lakes, disappear into one another through the mock resemblances of the code. Vision, perhaps the most privileged metaphor of representational discourse, drips into "seas."

In the purgatory of *A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud* (and Spicer's division of *Heads* into a hell, purgatory and heaven must be taken ironically), the poet plays with and against the code. Spicer had begun to treat words as things in *After Lorca*, a tactic designed to make "real objects" magically appear. In *A Fake Novel*, he pursues this course: language may be forced to reveal the "absolutely temporary" if the poet handles words as objects to be exchanged, much as one would pass a salt shaker. Alternatively, the poet may focus on the *telos* of language, in order to make language point to what individual speakers experience as desire or intentionality. In the paradiso of *A Textbook of Poetry*, Spicer sets up a correspondence between the human longing for meaning and for audibility as a speaker (vs. what Blaser calls a "spoken" subject), and the desires of a semi-animate Logos (or "Lowghost"). There is a parallel between what the poet wants and what the language "wants": Spicer personifies the Logos to make visible his own desire and that of other humans. In the *Textbook*, "[t]he poet thinks continually of strategies, of how he can win out against the poem" (171).

A Fake Novel takes place in a dead letter office where the letters say things like "I love you more than anyone could ever do." This highly intimate message is addressed to "X" and signed by "Y." Spicer's point is clear: there is no particular human content in the code, but rather empty form. (Compare Spicer's position with Creeley's and Olson's "Form is never more than an extension of content." Given this dilemma, Rimbaud "[becomes] a telegram," short-circuiting the dead letter system. In the context of his own poetry, Rimbaud's synaesthesia can be read (and has been read by Gwendolyn Bays, for instance, in *The Orphic Vision*), as a longing for univocity. Spicer, however, finds another use for Rimbaud's famous colored vowels:

> A metaphor is something unexplained—like a place in a map that says that after this is desert. A shorthand to admit the unknown.
>
> A is a blank piece of driftwood being busted. E is a carpenter whose pockets are filled with saws, and shadows, and needles. I

> is a pun. O is an Egyptian tapestry remembering the glories of an unknown alien. U is the reverse of W. They are not vowels.
>
> When he said it first, he created the world. (163)

Language creates the world when it becomes an analogue of material reality. Even though the map is not the territory, metaphor admits the territory into the poem by itself becoming as opaque as "real objects."

Spicer's magical *dérèglement* of the code recalls the Orphic interdict against looking. Words can drag "the real" into the poem only by giving up their meanings, or as Spicer says in a letter to Graham MacIntosh, "NONSENSE IS A FORM OF MAGIC" (*Cat* 109). In "A Charm Against the Discovery of Oxygen," he remarks, "We had fought tooth and nail to maintain our beaches" (155). His fight is for the magical illusion of a division between sand and sea, or map and territory—between word-things and an actuality outside the system. By deliberately not looking at the medium that contains these "dualities," Spicer offers a charm against the all-pervasiveness of the linguistic atmosphere. Thus Rimbaud becomes an object to be exchanged between "grownups at the bar"—perhaps a shared wish for the irretrievable innocence of colored vowels, perhaps just a desire for some kind of interchange. Rimbaud is real and alive precisely because he no longer has a meaning:

> . . . he had been kissed
> So many times his face was frozen closed.
> His eyes would watch the lovers walking past
> His lips would sing and nothing else would move. (157)

Only as a dead love letter can Rimbaud become a message and bridge the distance between sender and receiver. Geoffrey Hartman's remarks in *Saving the Text* are to the point:

> Style may be a *continued* solecism. The language-sensitive writer makes the transgression habitual. His cryptic or idiosyncratic manner is an expressive mask . . . .
>
> The word is only "like" a word in these situations: it is divinely stupid or a ghostly sound. (144)

In Spicer's "Certain Seals Are Broken," words offer an "eternal privacy" through a magic which reverses the procedures of Duncan's incarnationism: Duncan makes the flesh luminous with language; Spicer makes words correspond to the dumbness of matter. Rimbaud is

> . . . A cry in the night. An offer.
> What the words choose to say. An offer
> of something. A peace. (166)

If Spicer had chosen to leave matters here, he might also have left hell behind. But the title of this penultimate poem, "Certain Seals Are Broken," suggests the impossibility of escaping the *telos* of language. Again, Spicer hangs on to the fact that the system is supposed to carry messages, that individual speakers are caught up in *wanting* to understand. In *A Textbook of Poetry*, he takes up the functional transcendence of the Logos as the origin of desire. If in *Fake Novel* he makes substances of words through magic, in *Textbook* he turns to surrealism to describe their function.

The point of the bridge game is to inquire into the nature of the relations between things. It is the "between" that bothered Emerson, and it continues to bother Spicer. In the second poem of *Textbook*,

> It is as if nothing in the world existed
> except metaphors—linkings between things.
> Or as if all our words without the things
> above them were meaningless. (169)

In the old cosmos, divided into hell, purgatory and heaven, words had "things above them" which guaranteed their meaning. *Heads of the Town* presents the empty husk of this cosmology, unbelieved in. Yet Spicer urges more than just the necessity of announcing one's disbelief. Belief in the literality of western metaphysics is not the issue, or rather the question of belief is made subtle when metaphysics turns into linguistics:

> "Personify," you say. "It is less
> abstract to make a person out of a sound."
> But the word was the Word not because he was
> personified but because he was a
> personification. As if he were human.
>
> To proclaim his humanity is to lie—to
> pretend that he was not a Word, that he was
> not created to Explain. The language where
> we are born across (temporarily and
> witlessly) in our prayers. (169)

In Christian thought, the Word personified is the Word incarnated, the Word illuminating and luminous within its material actualization. The verity of the Word becomes a doctrinal matter, or in Duncan's case, a question of belief in the "truth and life of myth." But it is harder to shrug off the question of metaphysics if, as Spicer suggests, the Word always was a personification, inextricably embedded in the code from which we learn about the relations between things. It is easier to get rid of God than to eliminate personifications, or any other figure of speech for that matter. To make words human by treating them as things, as Spicer does

in *Fake Novel,* is to ignore the operations of the system. The Word was "created to Explain," and insofar as the human organism desires (insofar as it is *articulated* and therefore limited), it is already "born across" into language. Spicer's *Textbook* anticipates Jacques Lacan's analysis of the operation of language on the individual psyche: as the human organism is initiated into the symbolic order it is wounded with incurable desire.[1] "Our prayers," as Spicer calls them, begin there—"As if the shimmering before them were not hell but the reach of something" (170).

Once God disappears under the weight of our disbelief, we are left with "the thought of thinking about God" (Spicer 172). Or as Michel Foucault says, "'I fear indeed that we shall never rid ourselves of God, since we still believe in grammar'" (298). When Spicer comes to speak directly about linguistics in *Language* (published three years after *Heads of the Town*), he says that "We make up a different language for poetry / And for the heart—ungrammatical" (233). But his disbelief is ironic: consciousness is bound by the "reach" or movement of language. In *After Lorca,* Spicer had described words as "rope," something with which to drag the real into the poem. In *Textbook* he finds, "It is the definition of the rope that ought to interest everyone who wants to climb the rope" (173). One of the strongest metaphors of *A Textbook* is "the Indian rope trick": a rope hangs between nothing and nothing for "a little Indian boy" to climb up. The rope is a bridge with nothing to bridge, an explanation that cannot explain, absurd as a textbook of poetry, or a car going nowhere. It is an absurdity the poet cannot not believe.

In his documentation of various shamanic practices in *Shamanism,* Mircea Eliade discusses the history of the rope trick in India[2]:

> The famous rope trick of the fakirs creates the illusion that a rope rises very high into the sky; the master makes a young disciple climb it until he disappears from view. The fakir then throws his knife into the air, and the lad's limbs fall to the ground one after another. (69)

A fate shared by Orphic poets who descend to hell on a rope ladder? Eliade says that the rope trick is an initiation rite. "Ancestral or evil spirits" dismember the shaman and then his body is indestructably reformed: "the future shaman has a 'new body' that enables him to gash his flesh with knives, run swords through himself, touch white-hot iron, and so forth" (429). The rope itself stretches between heaven and earth, a passage between gods and ancestors, and human beings.

Heaven and hell, the referents which once ensured the meaningfulness of the rope (and promised an indestructible body), are missing as literalities in Spicer's cosmos. Yet the rope remains in position, still stretching upward as if it had a purpose. Ironically, the poet learns intentionality from this absurd posture of the language rope. He is thus placed in the ridiculous position of trying to fit his experience of desire into a series of now-dead letters:

> Seeking experience for specific instances, drawing upon the pulp of the brain and the legs and the arms and the motion of the poet, making him see things that can be conveyed through their words.
>
> Or disbelief too. Seeking experience for specific instances. And in the gradual lack of the beautiful, the lock of the door before him, a new Eurydice, stepping up to him, punning her way through his hell. (171)

Hell is the poet's inability to translate lived experience into language, even as he realizes that experience is mediated by language. In place of the specificity the poet wants, language offers only "a new Eurydice," another always-absent eternal, like God or the Beloved, or, to draw in Spicer's other books, a Holy Grail or a diamond. As Spicer says it, "Meaningless words stick in the throat and you cough them up as an abstraction of what you are trying to cough up" (174).

There is another way to climb the rope, though. In *Textbook*, Spicer stresses the divinity of the Logos in order to keep the "reach" of the rope working. Through the meaningless abstractions, Spicer proposes a limited *telos;* not, literally, a movement toward the Logos in his godhead, but toward human intentionality:

> . . . These humans—uncoded, uncyphered, their sheer presences. Beyond the word "Beauty."
>
> They are the makers of man's enterprise. Beyond the word "blowtorch," the two of them, hold a blowtorch at all beauty. (182)

Beauty, Truth, God, all the big generalities to which the rope used to be tied and which were supposed to define the end of "man's enterprise," here reverse into the beginnings of it. It is the fact of the enterprise, implicit in these abstractions, that is important, the "definition of the rope" that Spicer reclaims: intentionality as such, and the experience of desire. In the love letter of *A Fake Novel,* the code undermines the feelings and will of "X" and "Y," thus reducing them to mere cyphers. By disclosing intentionality within the structure of the code, Spicer, once again, makes language point to experience. The vertical road slopes downward to a "hell of meaning" in *Homage to Creeley*, but by conflating the metaphysical tradition with linguistics (and the two have never been separate), Spicer finds another use for the vertical: it signals desire. The road or rope goes down *and* up. The poet, however, ascends not to a metaphysical absolute, but to the physics of "these humans," their laws of motion, so to speak. The rope being as it is, absurdly upright, enterprising Indian boys may climb up it.

A Textbook of Poetry contains a number of definitions of surrealism. In the opening poem, Spicer says that the "surrealism of the poet could not write words" (169). Later he remarks that surrealism is the "intention that things do not fit together" (176)—the intention of an impossible separation between words and things, perhaps. The poet builds around a reality scattered "like the pieces of a totally unfinished jigsaw puzzle" in order to "cause an alliance between the dead and the living" (176). This alliance is as close to paradise as Spicer gets—this truce between dead letters and the "absolutely temporary."

Spicer's surrealism represents a self-consciously absurd effort to reappropriate the code. Unlike Blaser, Spicer keeps a syntax that is quite unremarkable. Blaser's syntactic discontinuities make visible a dialectic between context and text. The bi-polar field of the poem is formed of the relationship between conscious experience (internalized language) and a socio-linguistic history that is "older and other" than the poet. Spicer, on the other hand, plays with the notion of an outside uncontaminated by language, and to this end, he loads his sentences with an "alien" semantic cargo. As early as the *Imaginary Elegies* (1951), he talks about a "train with its utterly alien cargo" (*ONS* 53). The intention behind such tactics is to force the machinery of the code to disclose the man inside it (as Poe discloses the man inside the mechanical chess player). If magic makes the word substantial, surrealism makes the language machine bear a human message. From the dead letter office of *A Fake Novel*, Spicer moves to a post office in Africa:

> . . . All the words they use for poetry are meaningless.
>
> Postage stamps at the best. Surrealism a blue surcharge for Tchad. This is an imaginary African kingdom which will never gain independence because it does not exist and is not merely an act of the imagination and did issue postage stamps. This is the poest [sic] and the poem talking to you. (180)

The African kingdom—and Spicer may have had in mind Duncan's "African Elegy" with its "mind's / natural jungle," as well as Rimbaud's defection from poetry to Africa—will never "gain independence" from the code. Nonetheless there are postage stamps issued from this place and it "is not merely an act of the imagination." The images which Spicer says are idealizations in *Homage to Creeley* return, via the dead letter office of *A Fake Novel*. Having been cancelled ("All the words they use for poetry are meaningless"), the image begins to speak again, this time from the outside. What comes through is the intention of a communication, quite simply, "the poest [sic] and the poem talking to you." As if there were real lemons—and as if a metaphor could bring them into the poem. In "The Practice of Outside," Blaser says of Spicer's surrealism that it is "the under-the-real which comes forward when the fixed-real dissolves" and he adds that "it is attached to an Orphic methodology of great

complexity" (323). The universe above and below the words follows the poet out of hell, but one look, one demand for understanding, and hell is once more everywhere. Both Tchad and the outside are imaginary—and yet language is not all. As Spicer says in *A Fake Novel*, "We are snark-hunters. Brave as we disappear into the clearing" (165). "These humans," hunting themselves.

A Textbook of Poetry is just that: a book about "wanting to explain," and about how to squeeze an explanation from the Logos. Like a fur-lined teacup, the sentence must be made to display its own structure, *and* make visible the incongruity between two different orders of reality—between linguistic paradigms and real lemons. Spicer's relationship to the original surrealist movement is thus highly ironic.[3] If as Franklin Rosemont says surrealism "demonstrates not only the continuity between internal and external reality but their essential unity" (*What is Surrealism* 24), if the apparent discontinuity of the surrealist image is meant to reveal a larger unity, then Spicer reverses the process. *His* surrealism derives from "the intention that things do not fit together." The sentence must disclose the separateness of the "absolute temporary."

It is to force such a disclosure that the poet plays the language game.

> The poet wants to take up all the marbles and put them in his pocket. Wants marbles. Where the poem is like winning the game.
>
> It is so absurd that the rats calling "Credo quia absurdum" or the cats or the mountain lions become a singular procession of metaphors. Each with their singular liturgy.
>
> These are words and their words holler hollowly in the rabbit burrows, in the metaphors, in the years of our life. (180)

To communicate, explain, make an appearance as a speaker rather than as a "spoken" subject, the poet has to lose his marbles in order to get them back in the absurdity of a "procession of metaphors" (a *procession*, or a train with an alien cargo, going somewhere). Spicer's disbelief in the Logos reverses into an "I believe because it is absurd." This hellish liturgy forces the language toward the hard (difficult, solid) actuality of the (diamond, marble) "years of our life"—forces the poem, in a final, bitterly lemon-flavored, ironic inversion to hold a life incarnate.

3. Noise: The Music of Hell

When Orpheus sings, nature moves. The lure of music, as Nietzsche writes of it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is its promise of intuitive access to a universal "ground of being." Music answers the human desire to "tear asunder the veil of Maya, to sink back into the original oneness of nature; . . . to express the very essence of nature symbolically" (27). Among

nineteenth-century American writers, music emerges as one solution to the distance between the "me" and "not-me."

John Irwin says of Whitman's *Song of Myself*, that the "poem/self aspires to that condition of music in which matter and form, inner and outer blend—a condition in which 'presence' is simply that absence of an external reference that we call self-referentiality" (*American Hieroglyphics* 99). The poem becomes its own guarantee of authenticity because it contains its own origin. Comparing Whitman's *Song* to Schopenhauer's music-as-will (and Schopenhauer is an important source for *The Birth of Tragedy*), Irwin says,

> Music's lack of an external referent exactly mirrors the will's lack of an external referent. Thus Whitman's making the self the sole reference of the poem necessarily involved his identifying the poem/self with music, for what Pater meant when he said that all art aspires to the condition of music . . . is that all art aspires to the self-referentiality of the Romantic self, the self as pure will, as pure motion/emotion. (101)

The difficulty with Whitman's position, as Irwin sees it, is that Whitman imagines world will to be a larger version of his individual will. Poe's *Eureka* falls under this critique too. When Poe merges "individual identity" with the "general consciousness," he seems to be dissolving ego into world, but in fact dissolves world into ego (109-10). This segment of Irwin's argument recalls Roy Harvey Pearce's conclusions regarding American romantics in *The Continuity of American Poetry*. Pearce says of Emerson that, "He imputes his own sensibility to the world in order to understand it as somehow akin to him" (155). Fashioned after the image of the individual self, the cosmic Self of the text turns out to be little more than the individual writ large.

Whitman, Poe and Emerson, like Nietzsche, attempt to imagine a "ground of being" beyond the individual, yet none of these writers quite succeeds in imagining that ground as other than some kind of "oneness." It is this thought of the One that leads them into a vocabulary that cannot but sound anthropocentric and egocentric to contemporary ears. Nietzsche clearly says that Dionysiac music signals the annihilation of the individual: at-oneness with the life force means the loss of consciousness. However, his vocabulary, and that of the Americans, slips and slides toward a conflation of "mystical oneness" (Nietzsche's phrase) with Dionysiac flux. The efforts of these writers to identify music with the "ground of being" represents another try for a sacred language, and a confusion of the mystic's ascent with the Orphic's descent. (Here I follow Gwendolyn Bays' distinctions in *The Orphic Vision*: the mystic experiences an expansion of consciousness and a heightened lucidity; the Orphic descends to the dark of the mind, and a state of unknowingness). When American romantics identify the self with eternal becoming, they

endow the individual voice with a largeness it cannot possess except by losing its ability to possess anything at all.

Orphic mythology (as opposed to Christian mythology) implies this catch. Orpheus can move nature, but he cannot charm the Bacchantes; he can retrieve Eurydice, but he cannot look at her. Consciousness cannot be totalized. As Orphic poets, Blaser and Spicer insist that the poetic "I" be a mediated, "unknowing" voice. Duncan, on the other hand, follows Whitman in identifying his voice with the cosmic voice of the text. In "An Apollonian Elegy," for instance, the poet's voice blends with Apollo's song, and that song becomes an analogue of biological process.[4] Through these analogies (and Duncan's analogies are "fictive certainties"), the poet can sing directly of "what is": death may be overcome through the regenerative powers of the bio-text.

In contrast to Duncan's Apollonian singing, the music of hell offers no consolation for death. Spicer's *Book of Music* begins with a line by Poe who, preoccupied as he was with Unity, fails to conceive of it in substantialist terms. Unity, Poe says, is "material nihility": it is a formless "indefinite." Spicer takes the "true music" to be a noise "as absolutely devoid of meaning / As a French horn" (69). Music says nothing; or rather, material flux cannot be born across into language. In his "Improvisations On a Sentence by Poe,"

> "Indefiniteness is an element of the true music."
> The grand concord of what
> Does not stoop to definition. The seagull
> Alone on the pier cawing its head off
> Over no fish, no other seagull,
> No ocean . . . . (69)

Spicer's irony is perhaps directed against traditional notions of irrelativity: that which "does not stoop to definition" is without relation, and that which is without relation is One—an Aquinian definition of God. Yet language articulates no particular "one." Spicer's "grand concord" is a travesty of the plenitude of meaning that music (the grand music of the spheres?) once seemed to offer. The seagull's pointless squawk says that matter and meaning are not equivalent.

I find an illuminating parallel between the "true music" of hell and Michel Serres' discussion of song in *The Parasite*. There are grasshoppers and ants, Serres says, singers and producers. The singer-grasshopper "gets power less because he occupies the center than because he fills the environment." This parasite is a disruptive, "anti-substantialist" force: "singing is not exchangeable; singing is not coin of the realm" (96). The producer-ant, however, always tries to centralize its power, and maintain that centrality by deparasiting its space. The end of a metaphysics of substance marks the triumph of the contemporary grasshopper: "Substantialism was and is the refusal of voices and wind. From now on, only relations, only waves" (97). The noisy parasite is the

entropic force inherent in *any* system, including the biological system of the human organism. As such, it is akin to Spicer's indefinite seagull and to the Other as Blaser defines it in "The Stadium of the Mirror," as the "opposite and companion of any man's sudden form" (55).

In Blaser's poetry, noise is a principle of transformation. "'Meaning is a kind of movement'," he says, "never disrespectful of the indeterminate which is its musical, inescapable ground" ("SM" 61). Spicer, however, focusses on the *loss* of definition that noise implies. In his "Orfeo," Orpheus' music turns the poet toward another linguistic hell:

> Sharp as an arrow Orpheus
> Points his music downward.
> Hell is there
> At the bottom of the seacliff.
> Heal
> Nothing by this music.
> Eurydice
> Is a frigate bird or a rock or some seaweed.
> Hail nothing
> The infernal
> Is a slippering wetness out at the horizon.
> Hell is this:
> The lack of anything but the eternal to look at
> The expansiveness of salt
> The lack of any bed but one's
> Music to sleep in. (70)

Music cannot produce presence or heal the wounds inflicted by language. In this poem, language plays the cruelest of tricks on the poet, by showing him that "Eurydice" is merely an "eternal," or a linguistic substitute for living flesh. The poet who stubbornly insists upon looking at the "real" Eurydice, looks at his own death.

Orpheus enrages the Bacchantes, and one reason for this, specific to Blaser's and Spicer's work, is that Orpheus refuses to give up his consciousness in order to participate in the rites ("the participation is broken," Blaser says in "Image-Nation 1"). It is this recognition, that in order to join the Dionysiac dance of the atoms one must be willing to give up consciousness, that there can be no having it both ways, no looking *and* restoration of the Beloved, that haunts Spicer's poetry. In "Ghost Song," he speaks of the "in/ability to love." The line break says that it is the "in" ability, the inability to be "in" (inside, at-one-with) which stops the poet from loving. But the ambiguity of the lining also says that the poet cannot not be in love either: he cannot free himself of desire.

Spicer's version of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, entitled *Pentheus and the Dancers*, is dedicated to Pentheus, the man who resisted Dionysus, and "to the god that killed him" (115). As Spicer presents him, Pentheus is a pathetic and ridiculous figure. He is hot-headed, xenophobic (Dionysus

is "this god with an Asiatic name"), prudish (the Bacchantes are "whores for Aphrodite"), ignorant, irreverent and pugnacious. But his contest with Dionysus is not a fair one: the game is fixed, and the vengeance the god exacts is extravagant. Pentheus must not only be dismembered by his own mother; he must also be publicly humiliated. The Stranger of the play, an incarnation of Dionysus, sees to it that Pentheus is led to his death dressed as a girl:

> I want him to be laughed at, led through the crowded streets dressed as a maiden, through the very city where he made threats against our god. (134)

There is a touch of pettiness, or petulance, in Spicer's Dionysus which lets the reader sympathize with the foolish man who takes on a god as his opponent.[5] Pentheus is fighting with the ocean. Dionysus is "wetness," Teiresias says: "He is everything that is not earth but which mixes with earth and white is his color . . ." (121). The god is another version of that "slippering wetness" in "Orfeo," or of the "white endlessness" in "Juan Ramon Jiminez" (in *After Lorca*). A "grand concord," and a terrible manifestation of the "true music." In contrast, Pentheus is "earth," down to earth, solid, one puny dissenting voice against a flood of Dionysiac destruction.

When Dionysus is unable to convince Pentheus to honor his rites, he utters a scream which determines the fate of the latter. That inarticulate scream hovers over Spicer's *oeuvre*. In *After Lorca* a "dog howl[s] with pure mind" (23). In *Language* "white and endless signals" (217) damage the poet's "radio" (his ability to transmit and receive messages). In "Orpheus in Hell," the poet cannot make himself heard above the infernal racket:

> When he first brought his music into hell
> He was absurdly confident. Even over the noise of the
> shapeless fires
> And the jukebox groaning of the damned
> Some of them would hear him. In the upper world
> He had forced the stones to listen.
> It wasn't quite the same. And the people he remembered
> Weren't quite the same either. He began looking at faces
> Wondering if all of hell were without music.
> He tried an old song but pain
> Was screaming on the jukebox and the bright fire
> Was pelting away the faces . . . . (*ONS* 21)

In "Cantata" (*A Book of Music*), the foreign noise threatens all that we have traditionally called meaning:

> . . . There is a high scream.
> Rain threatens. That moment of terror.
> Strange how all our beliefs
> Disappear. (70)

"That moment" takes the poet to the edge of consciousness—the vertiginous seacliff leading down to oceanic oblivion or a hell of nonsense. In Blaser's terms, it is the site of "the *perilous act*" which opens the conscious mind to otherness. In "Image-Nation 12,"

> if you
> go there,
> the waves take you . . . . (48)

Blaser's attitude toward noise, however, is less hostile (less pained) than is Spicer's. In "The Stadium of the Mirror," he says,

> Poetry always has to do with consciousness. Its restlessness is what we have called the unconscious, expecting the past and future from the present. The man I watch with all my heart is both visible, a stop, and invisibly continuous. The static is oneself alone or translated into the mass where we are all alike.
> *The true is the Bacchantic frenzy in which no friend is not drunken; and because each as soon as it differentiates itself, immediately dissolves—the frenzy is as if transparent and simple repose.* (Hegel)
> Poetry, for all its snazz, reverses into the simple birthright—that one does step into a cosmos. (56)

Noise or static means that "form is alive" (54) and a movement rather than a state of being. As I hear it, Blaser's discussion of his *Image-Nations* in "Stadium" includes a veiled critique of Spicerian desire:

> The Sublime, the Beautiful, the Terror are not exactly human (Arendt), and that is the reason the *Image-Nations* are not devoted to my logic of desire, but to a nation invaded by what is other than itself—a continuous forming. An original precision of meaning may then enter the word desire: 'Perhaps (like *considerare*) allied to *sidus*, a star, as if to turn the eyes from the stars' (Skeat). The body in the suddenness of its form stands there like the period at the end of a sentence. This off-spring of the universe than refurls. Dis-aster—the reversal of an act—dis—to turn from aster—star. Dis-stars. (57)

His "in/ability to love" signals Spicer's unwillingness to admit kinship with the Bacchantes—with the flux ("continuous forming") of the physical universe. Spicer takes up the bitterness of death; Blaser makes

an alliance with it. In the dismembered body of Orpheus, Blaser sees a birthright: we are not wholes (self-identical), but rather fragments of cosmos. The primordial cannot be imagined as a larger version of the poet's ego, but neither is it entirely alien. In "Image-Nation 9,"

> . . . 'we are under image'
> rythmos (form's movement) to walk into 'the
> primordial always exists' face to face always outside
> ourselves the astonishment is
> that *it is kosmos*
> *playing out with one man* . . . . (31)

From these different positions, Blaser and Spicer both effect strict delineation of the authorial voice. The poet who does not identify his voice with universals obviously cannot speak in them. Whitman's "I" is privileged because he makes it equivalent to the poem-song. Nietzsche's "I" is equally privileged because it is the "'I' dwelling, truly and eternally, in the ground of being" (39). In a more subtle fashion, Serres' grasshopper-parasite is privileged as soon as it eliminates the obnoxious ant: "The world empire of IBM, tomorrow, the absolute empire of relation. The end of substance" (96). As if there were *only* noise, and never that idiosyncratic composition we call experience, or as if presence could only be absolute, or not at all. In contrast, Blaser and Spicer each offer a voice that is mediated by noise. The lyric "I" thus shrinks to a mortal size, and the substantial becomes just that—material substance. Blaser says in "The Stadium of the Mirror," that the "thought of totals [is] the original totalitarianism . . ." (61). The author disappears from his work amid the wreckage of the metaphysical tradition, but he returns as a finite voice. His return heralds the end of tragedy.

4. The Death of Tragedy

Tragedy, as Nietzsche defines it, demands the joyful consent of the individual to annihilation, a celebration of and sacrifice to the life force. The "metaphysical solace" of tragedy is the permanence it offers: participation in "true being surviving every phenomenal change" (53). When Blaser and Spicer insist on the singularity of the poet's voice, they implicitly refuse to identify with "true being" or the "spirit of music"—which is to say that they do not speak for the species. In *Homage to Creeley*, Spicer's tragic muse has bad teeth, and worse, she is neither real nor pure. Hell is hell partly because it is not tragic:

> Tragedy has exact limits that Hell cannot enclose. This spoils the trip of The Poet and The Poem through Hell and is the point at which they both protest. (135)

As Nietzsche remarks,

> Someone, I can't recall who, has claimed that all individuals, as individuals, are comic, and therefore untragic; which seems to suggest that the Greeks did not tolerate individuals at all on the tragic stage. (66)

"The Truth is Laughter" poems in Blaser's *Syntax* are comic because they present the eccentric limitations of an individual consciousness:

> "verterberries," the locals called them
> after Mary Anning found
> ichthysaur, 1811
> pleoiosaur, 1824
> pterodactyl, 1826 (19)

Or from Joe Panipakuttuk, Blaser takes the following observation:

> *when you see musk oxen for the first time*
> *they have a huge back on them* (27)

Spicer's humor is darker. The puns and jokes which pepper his work, particularly *Heads of the Town*, disturb linguistic conventions but they also always threaten the poet himself. Spicer pushes the singularity of the poet's "I" to its nonsensical extremity. In *A Textbook of Poetry*, he speaks of a "private language" and "ununderstanding" as the "real poetry . . . beyond us, beyond them" (183), and in the *Vancouver Lectures* he tells a story about making up a fake Martian language:

> . . . I think I started it, or either I or John Ryan started it—we decided to start talking in Martian just to bug the tourists. And after a while we could actually converse in Martian to each other. And no recognizable linguistic things or anything else. (*VL* 181)

A practical joke to be sure, but Spicer's jokes are never innocent. ("We make up a different language for poetry.") Fake Martian effects a discontinuity with linguistic paradigms, but ironically, even Martian may become paradigmatic. Any repeatable series of sounds becomes a code ("we could actually converse") and the speaker once more subject to its orders.

This practicing of idiosyncratic speech, however, distinguishes the voices in Blaser's and Spicer's poetry from the universal voice of poetic tradition, whether the universal be imagined as the life force, or as a linguistic pattern. In "further" (from *Syntax*), Blaser says,

> fate and form are interchangeable
> the anger between them
> is the dream in skin on our bones (55)

The anger between fate and form proposes a non-identity between the "dream in skin" (our flesh) and the mediating systems which produce our "nature." It is this non-identity which replaces tragedy, in the Nietzschean sense, with comedy.

In the *H.D. Book*, Duncan offers a different discussion of fate, form and tragedy. Fate is a "formal imperative," he says, and a principle in opposition to individual psychology:

> The reality principle sees the oedipus complex as a fixation where sexual wishes are in conflict with tribal custom, or even, as Freud does at times, as an instinct to incest and murder. The pleasure principle insists it would be best to let well-enough alone.
>
> "Let me," Teiresias insists,
>
> > go home. It will be easiest for us both
> > to bear our several destinies to the end
> > if you follow my advice.
>
> But Oedipus must, for the play's sake climb up into the uneasiest state necessary for the moment at which the crisis of the play shows forth and we realize the fulfillment of the plot. Beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the reality principle, is the play principle seeking its passionate formal fulfillment. This is the only glory we know.

* * * * * * * * * *

> The difference between the neurotic nursing his guilt or sin and the hero is the dramatic gesture, the formal imperative. (*Montemora* 94)

The individual achieves stature, becomes a hero, through the same means that the poet finds a universal Voice: both must come under the "formal imperative." For Whitman and Emerson, the imperative was the law of nature; for Duncan it is syntax, the "law I love" (*OF* 10).

No statement could be more antithetical to Spicer's insistence on the idiosyncrasy of the poet's voice, and yet Spicerian privacy does not represent freedom from fate, but rather a struggle with the fatefulness of mortality itself. In *Homage*, "hell / Is where your apartness is your apartness" (144). "Dis-aster," to turn away from the stars, Blaser says, disastrous to deny kinship with the cosmos that is made actual to us in death. Duncan, through his bio-linguistics, finds the stars to be "a map,"

and for men "a great design of where they were and then of when" (*Sumac* 102). But in Spicer's thinking, stars are "what the Jews wore," marks of a violent, joyless death. From the perspective of the individual (as opposed to that of the species), the Bacchic dance means oblivion rather than participation. The stars will continue to shine—on unmarked graves. Spicer and Duncan are bound by opposition, the one in a comic hell, the other in his tragic paradise. Blaser takes up a third position: form is neither a pure visibility nor a "formal imperative," but energy that sometimes gets "hung up," as the body "in the suddenness of its form," stops and then "refurls":

> it is the interchange the form took
> like walking in and out of a star
> the words are left over   collapsed
> into themselves   in the movement
>
> between visible and invisible (*IN* 28)

At the end of the road, *in the middle of the journey*, a god-language dies slowly, leaving star-words and meanings to collapse in black holes. These are endings into which a poet may disappear, or from which s/he might begin again. On the other side of the seacliff,

> Walking on the beach, fondly or not fondly, they hear the
> Sound the
> Ocean makes. (Spicer 195)

Notes

1. In the essay accompanying his translation of *The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, Anthony Wilden summarizes Lacan's shifting analysis of desire:

> . . . the lack of object is what enables the child to progress to the subjectivity of 'I,' or, in the mathematical metaphor, from the not-nothing-not-something of zero to the status of 'One,' who can therefore know two. The subject *is* the binary opposition of presence and absence, and the discovery of One—the discovery of difference—is to be condemned to an eternal desire for the nonrelationship of zero, where identity is meaningless. (191)

Spicer focusses his argument with the Logos on the fact that language creates in us a desire for "sheer presences" which the structure of the system paradoxically precludes.

2. For another discussion of Eliade and Spicer's version of the rope trick, see John Granger, "The Idea of the Alien," M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1982.

3. Spicerian dictation, involving a mythology of the "outside," is symmetrically opposed to Andre Breton's automatism. Spicer borrows his version of dictation from occult practices. In contrast, Breton is careful to distinguish his

automatism from the mediumship of the spiritualist. In "The Automatic Message" (1933), Breton says,

> We are aware that the term 'automatic writing' as used in surrealism, lends itself to disputation. If I may be held partly responsible for this impropriety, it is because 'automatic writing' . . . has always seemed to me the limit towards which the surrealist poet must tend, but without losing sight of the fact that, contrary to what spiritualism proposes—that is, the dissociation of the subject's psychological personality—surrealism proposes nothing less than the *unification* of that personality. For us, obviously the question of the externality of the 'voice' (to repeat for the sake of simplification) could not even be raised.

It is precisely the "dissociation of the subject's psychological personality" that Spicer is after—an imaginary "outside" to the subject produced by language.

4. "An Apollonian Elegy" proposes a bond between mortal poet and immortal god. Through the death of Hyacinthus, Apollo suffers mortality, just as humans do. However, both god and man find comfort in the return (cyclical renewal) of Hyacinthus each year and in "undying song":

> . . . Your grief springs anew
> in every heart. The human flesh is
> hyacinth staind. Were you, O too mortal
> god of sun, my angel that would have me love
> and hunger? that by your grievous hand
> would strike from me complaint, complaint,
>
> AI AI
>
> in the year's renewal, your eternal
> lamentation?
>
> Never shall he be from me
> erased. He is my very grief, my spirit's shade
> cast in the light of immortality's sun.
>
> And thus, Apollo,
> sing I, who die utterly, your undying song. (*YAC* 72-73)

5. In an unpublished letter to Graham Macintosh, Spicer writes:

> I hope you'll let me know what you think of the play. I don't understand all of it myself. (I'm a bit too much Pentheus except in my poetry and I think that I'm afraid to understand.)

This letter is part of in the Spicer collection of the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

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"Music. Heart. Thinking.": An Interview with Fred Wah

This interview took place at Lola Tostevin's house in February, 1987.

Lola Lemire Tostevin: You were born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan and lived there until you were four years old. In your book *Waiting for Saskatchewan,* you write that you want it back, that you are waiting for Saskatchewan to appear again over the edge. Does this indicate a nostalgia for the past, for lost presence? Do you believe that through writing you can retrieve that absence?

Fred Wah: The term nostalgia bothers me. What that is, in the first poem of the book, is trying to deal with a geographical reality or concreteness that we all carry. Place as stain, the stain the world makes on a person or vice versa. Although we went back to Saskatchewan on visits, I didn't grow up there and there's something unresolved about that place for me. I live in the mountains now, and this might be one reason for it. The memory, or if you want, the nostalgia of the flat, the plain. But I think it's something more specific in my life that I was never able to deal with, never ever able to fully imagine. Since I left at such a young age, the images aren't totally clear. In that sense I feel it still owes me. The place still owes me. I felt that in order for my body to become a complete body in the world I had to have this kind of accounting.

LLT: So you're using the writing to retrieve those images from the past.

FW: Yah, I guess. I don't know if that's the purpose of the writing. Certainly in the act of writing, that's one of the things I'm doing. Conjuring up the images, the memories, the residue. There's a residue from the past that I've never dealt with so the writing is helping to do that, but I don't know that writing is the only way of doing that.

LLT: Writing takes place in the present. How can you retrieve something from the past through the present act of writing?

FW: Except that language is a stream that comes out of the past and carries with it the weight of time and space. I trust that language carries with it information, not necessarily about anything other than itself, and

that it's all there, and that fascinates me. It fascinates me that language can reveal to us somehow any of that.

LLT: There's been a great deal of emphasis placed by women on restoring the mother, or the pre-Oedipal psychical stage of development. Many women writers have tried to displace the authority of the father and restore the influence of their mothers. You seem to be pre-occupied in finding the father in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. There's more emphasis on the Oriental side through your father than the Swedish side through your mother. Do the images that you are trying to clarify reside in the tracing back to the male parent? Does it reside in the name of the father? Why not through the mother and the Swedish roots?

FW: OK, this is difficult. I've thought about this and I really don't know except I suspect there are several reasons, the main one being that my father died and my mother is still alive. He died when he was quite young and a lot of what I'm dealing with is his death, his absence. The fact that I didn't have part of my life to share with him, although we didn't necessarily share a lot when he was alive. We didn't have that close a relationship although I greatly admired him. Another thing I suppose is that I'm male. Also the Chinese, the exotic aspect of that fascinates me.

LLT: Why would the Chinese element be more exotic than the Swedish?

FW: More exotic because it's more mysterious. The story around my grandfather and father is more mysterious than the story around my mother and her parents from Sweden. That's a fairly clear story—European move to Canada, etc. . . . But my Chinese grandfather untypically married an English woman. Also when I was a kid in elementary school, we had to fill out these forms on registration day and one of the things we had to put down was our racial origin and the teacher told me to put down "Chinese." We weren't allowed then to put down "Canadian." That wasn't considered a racial origin. It's illegal now to ask for anyone's racial origin in Canada, but at that time you wrote down where your father came from. It had nothing to do with the mother.

But as you know in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, the last section of the book is called "Father/Mother Haibun." I intentionally tried to engage some of the mother stuff partly as a way of exorcising this father obsession and also as a way of moving towards dealing with the mother thing because I am half Swedish. I've been thinking a lot about this and where it's gotten me is to my grandmothers. My Swedish grandmother, but especially my English grandmother—well, Irish and Scot from Ontario, actually. She intrigues me. Why did she marry this Chinaman? That's curious to me.

LLT: Maybe they were attracted to one another.

FW: Well considering the period, that's unusual. I have a feeling it's because my grandfather was a gambler and my grandmother was an ardent Salvation Armyist.

LLT: And she was out to save him? [Laughter] While we're on the subject of women, you've said that you were influenced by Quebec women writers. Who and in what way did they influence you?

FW: The most specific influence was Nicole Brossard. Curiously, the first thing that interested me was her narrative in *A Book*—not so much a disjunctive narrative but an angular cut, a slicing through the narrative, and the fact that she was allowing the short paragraph at the top of the page to constitute the continuity of some kind of narrative. It's really a novel in that it has characters, plot, story, but all of that, the conventional stuff of the novel is in the background and what's at the forefront is language. I got excited about that because that's what poets do. Well, not all poets—but the ones I'm interested in. Good poetry should bring language to the fore and she was doing it in prose. So I got excited by that and started to read more of her work. It was at a time when Coach House was publishing translations of her work so she was more readily available than other Quebecois writers. I've looked at others, but not with as much intensity. Talks with Nicole, why she writes the way she writes, have been very generative for me. It confirms the direction I've gone in.

LLT: You've mentioned Victor Shklovsky's theory of "making strange" as a technique of art in some interviews. How does that specifically apply to your writing or to what you were saying about Nicole's influence on your writing?

FW: What I saw in Nicole, for example, was a way of making strange and my big take on that has always been out of Keats' "negative capability." How to make use of negative capability in writing has always been of interest to me—being able to keep the writing in uncertainty, uncertain of where it's going, its unpredictability. To have that confirmed was a great thing for me.

LLT: How does that apply to *Waiting for Saskatchewan*? That book is not only more linear than your other books, it's also very lineal, filial. How do you "make strange" that setting?

FW: I don't know that it's making that setting strange, or making those people strange. It's using the language . . . well let me contrast it this way: *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* was published as a small book in Japan and I gave it away to friends and many of them said "gee, this is great Fred, I really loved it, why don't you write a novel. This would make a great novel." The notion was that this would make a great story. And for

about two minutes and thirty-eight seconds, I actually thought of writing a novel. In other words, what they were getting off on, and people do from that book, is the narrative, the story telling quality of it.

LLT: Do you think that's why *Saskatchewan* won a Governor General's Award—because it is more linear, more story telling than some of your writing? [Laughter] Which I think is all pretty terrific, but perhaps it would not attract as much attention . . . [Laughter]

FW: Yes, George Bowering was on the jury and it was something he could understand . . . [Laughter] But just a minute. These are heavy questions you're asking. That whole thing of estrangement and making strange . . .

LLT: Well I don't quite understand . . . . Shklovsky said that the purpose of art is to hold a perception as long as you can. How do you make strange by holding a perception?

FW: No, you hold the perception by making it strange. He said that the purpose of art was to make the stone stony. We don't pay attention to the fact that the stone is stony. It's a quality that's given, so it doesn't enter our perception. It's not something that we knowingly experience—but if I make the stone strange, so that somehow you can experience its stoniness, then there's a perception of something that wasn't there before.

LLT: OK, so I was trying to apply that to *Waiting for Saskatchewan*.

FW: For me it's the poetry, the play. Playing around from various angles—like the *utanikki*, a poetic diary of mixed prose and poetry, and the *Elite* series which explores the division between prose and poetry, and the *haibun*, prose written from a haiku sensibility. Although there's an underlying current of narrative about my father, the prairie, the café, the writing is still intentionally slightly angular because I play at the edges of the poems with language. I have a choice of telling a story about my father and all the restaurants he's been through in his life, in the straightest possible way, or I have the choice of using one long line that goes on and on, as in one of the *Elite* poems, because I want to place that form against the content. I'm interested in play, in invention. To make things strange through negative capability, or whatever means, can be useful to prolong or make something that isn't otherwise available. You twist the forms a bit, like in the prose poems . . . well that's not really a solid form, but—

LLT: Oh I think it's pretty solid—

FW: Oh yeah, but formally to describe what a prose poem is, it isn't that solid. It's a piece of prose, it's sentences, really.

LLT: But it has an energy that traditional poetry, or even poetry using the breath line doesn't always have. The line taken to the edge of the page seems to generate another kind of energy, can give it a certain rhythm that other line breaks don't.

FW: I discovered that in writing the *utanikki*, the poetic diary. Why should the diary be any less poetic than the poems, and why would the poems be more poetic than the diary? So that in my *utanikki*, *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, sometimes the diary entry is made so that it's just as oblique—

LLT: So one engenders the other, one is the condition of the other? I like that idea, actually. Speaking of rhythm, you use the word "movement" a lot in your writing and there are many images of movement such as skating, riding, horses, fish in water. I get the feeling when reading you that the environment for such movement, the skating arena, water, etc. is a mindscape for fluidity in the writing itself. Are you aware of this while writing?

FW: Yes, although I don't see it as fluidity but as movement. If you want a paradigm for those images that interest me, it's the notion of a plan, a set. The fish, for example. I have a series I'm working on, temporarily called "The Pickerel Series." I'm interested in the spawning fish carrying within itself some map, some imprint it's going to return to all its life. There are three terms that my teacher taught me—but I guess we shouldn't get too theoretical—

LLT: Why shouldn't we get theoretical?

FW: Well, three terms my teacher taught me are *topos*, *tropos* and *typos*. Charles Olson used those terms. *Topos* is place, *tropos*, tropism, is the innate reaction, the movement towards whatever one needs, and *typos* is the typeface, [slaps thigh] the imprint on the world that we make or the imprint the world makes on us. So what has always fascinated me, say about hockey, because I played hockey, is the invisibility of the movement. It's moving so fast, and there's that second sense of knowing where to move. Is he going to go there or not, and we're waiting for that moment, that split second to see whether the puck is going to go into the net. It's so nice to have the game fulfill the image.

LLT: The way the fish unexpectedly darts around.

FW: Yes, and the same thing happens when you ride a horse. I've never ridden a horse, except for a couple of times, but to ride, you have to have a mind-set, a body-set, an image of the thing in order to do it. You need to know how to swim before you can swim. I'm interested in the plot, the mass we carry inside ourselves and how this information operates. It's not

so much the movement or the fluidity, although that's part of it, but it's the movement and fluidity in fulfillment of some master plan or structure.

LLT: So that everything you graph—write—is already in you? There's nothing new?

FW: Writing for me is simply a way of calling out the information that's already there: discovering what's there and generating new ways into a world that's already there. You carry with you who you are.

LLT: What about *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*? The pictures were already there, they were anterior to your experience. Didn't you come up with something new in the way you read them? Didn't the two together create something new?

FW: Nothing's new.

LLT: There are new ways of tracing, perceiving.

FW: OK, they came together and provided a newness for me because it wasn't there before for me, if you see what I'm getting at. I really am more of a Buddhist in all this, I guess . . . I mean I'm not a practising Buddhist, but there are no beginnings and endings. I love Fenollosa's take on the Chinese written characters for poetry . . . . How false the sentence is as a fabrication, as representation of the world, because nothing in the world ends, nothing ends, so that sentences seem to be such false representations of it. I'm interested in making it new, but it's the same old thing. It's making it new for me, but it's not new, it's already been around. It's the same thing with language. I really love the sense that language carries with it an "emic" structure which is invisible to us but which gets actualized when we use it.

LLT: I don't know what you mean by "emic."

FW: I learned this in linguistics—"eme" as in phoneme, and morpheme. We know that there is this invisible "eme" in English that no one can say as a phoneme. I can say the word "ash" in Canada and someone in Buffalo, New York will pronounce it "eash," and although they are very close together, they're not the same sounds. I'm not saying that they're speaking a foreign language in Buffalo. When we hear dialects of a language, we know them as dialects, as variations. They are variations of this "eme." Now the only thing that is carrying that "eme" is language. No one person, no one dialect, no one group carries that "eme" for the rest of us. Language carries the "eme." I love the organic nature of language as something that exists outside ourselves and continues to flow through time and space and carries with it all the impedimenta and residue of—of everything. And all languages do that.

LLT: So the map, the geography we were talking about at the very beginning, is that a geography of language?

FW: I don't know what "geography of language" means.

LLT: Is language the place that you're most comfortable in? If your own personal geography is not really Saskatchewan, or any other place you've written about, then does your geography become language?

FW: Or more accurately, language has become a way of dealing with a geographic "eme" in my cosmology, to use a simile. In other words, you can carry with you who you are, but not be able to tap that or have access to it and language can help you do that. I don't mean only written language, I mean also dance, music, mathematics, painting. These are all languages or ways of showing us what's there.

LLT: And you use both paintings and music in your writing.

FW: I'm not a painter, but I'm a musician. I studied music and played jazz trumpet for many years. A lot of my writing is jazz, just sheer shit jazz. Feels the same way it feels when I play the trumpet.

LLT: You've just finished a new series of pieces called *Music at the Heart of Thinking*. How do those pieces relate to music, to jazz?

FW: They're pushy pieces. They push constantly. Every step of writing in those pieces, every point, is to push it hard so it goes somewhere. Push it fast and force it to move. Don't sit around language, don't sit around word—but at the same time don't fall over, stay on your feet. I love that in music, playing the ad lib in a trumpet solo, or even a group. Trying to keep the piece together and hear the others in the group, how everything is going and push it so that it just about falls over the edge and doesn't. Like dissonance, I like the discord, the dissonant, because it pushes toward the edge and doesn't fall.

LLT: It pushes beyond anecdotes? Beyond story?

FW: I think so. I have nothing against the anecdote or the story, but I'm pushing beyond so it's not only anecdote or only story. I've done a couple of takes for *Music at the Heart of Thinking* on Frank Davey's last book, *The Abbotsford Guide to India*—which I think is one of his most wonderful books, by the way. It's got story, it's got image, geography, and allows Frank a large spectrum of play. In one of the lines he mentions the random notes on a flute in a hotel lobby. I love the sense of random notes, but you can't have random notes. As soon as you have two notes, they create a structure, a place that is no longer random. What you do when you're a musician or artist is you play the expectation of randomness against the

predictability of form that starts to occur. It's that tension between the two that makes it interesting, and it's the estrangement between the two that also makes it interesting. If one goes totally for one over the other, then it gets repetitive and boring. Many artists fall down on that, musically and visually, because they rely purely on formal devices. I fall down on that. Not all of my pieces are successful because they attempt to use form to create form and don't necessarily set up that tension. When a piece works for me, it makes those connections, and takes me to a new place from which language has other possibilities.

LLT: I've read *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, and heard you read several pieces from it. They're difficult pieces but they really hook you, and they were very well received at the reading. Why do you think people react so strongly to them? Is there finally a wider acceptance of non-linear, less content-oriented writing in Canada?

FW: Yeah . . . Writing is so far behind jazz and painting that way. I was happy that the audience liked them but I was surprised. Again, the technique is to push through the horn so fast and heavy that it goes all over the place but then to have it resolved, have a strong cadence. I think the reason the audience at Harbourfront liked them is that although they are oblique, there's something towards the end that brings it together and gives satisfaction to the helter skelter. They're not that readable off the page, but—

LLT: I've read them and I like them a lot. I liked them when you read them as well, because that adds another dimension, the cadence becomes more obvious, but even on the page where meaning totally escapes you at times, they still hook you. I have read some work where meaning escapes you and it gets really boring. I think it was Charles Bernstein who said that much so-called avant-garde writing done now is just as intrinsically boring as sentimental narrative stories. Both are difficult to do well. This cadence you refer to—is it expressed through the body-set you were talking about? Many theorists now emphasize the dual planes at which language operates. Julia Kristeva, for example, sees one of those planes as an instinctual drive such as cadence or rhythm.

FW: I haven't read much of Kristeva, but it sounds right. I don't know if it's necessarily tied to the body, as much as something that has feeling. It's very musical. Music by and large operates on cadence and I've always been interested in language as a cadential structure, even minutely, in terms of phrases and clauses. How they work cadentially, how a phrase is turned—I'm very curious about that. One of the reasons I've gotten into prose poems in the last few years, particularly in *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, is because I'm more interested in syntax, the syntagm, as a unit of composition, than I am in the line as a unit of composition. Yet both units, the line and the syntagm, require resolution, require movement

instead of shape, so I try to break through the syntax, play with it, cut through it, break it up a lot of the time. For about twenty years, I didn't pay much attention to syntax as a poet. I paid more attention to how the line works. My teachers, Creeley and Olson, were line people. Their contribution to changing my perception, at least of how poetry can sound, was through the line, and I was very happy working in the line and still am, but I'm also interested in breaking up other aspects of the poem. Just like the sound poets were interested in breaking up the chronological aspect of writing—playing with that. bpNichol's*The Martyrology* is a wonderful poem because it does that. If bp feels like breaking up sounds he breaks up sounds, and if he feels like breaking up sentences he breaks up sentences, and there's this swirl of breaking things up so they can be put back together again, so they can be resolved.

LLT: Olson believed that the "I" is always on the move, continually making itself over again. How do you think that applies to you?

FW: He did? He said that? I'm not quite sure what that means. What do you think it means?

LLT: I'm very much interested in the multiplicity of the selves. I don't believe that there is only one "I" or subject writing. Kristeva said that whenever you try to define the subject, say a woman, *"ce n'est jamais ça."* It's never that. It's always on the move towards some other definition. Someone said to me once that it was very important to displace the "I" in writing, and I said, "great, I'll displace it as soon as I find it," because I've never been able to find or define the "I" of my writing as one subject. I see a parallel between Olson's subject continually changing itself and Kristeva's subject-in-process. Are you aware of that process, of that multiplicity when you're writing?

FW: I haven't given it much thought. God, Lola, this is a huge question. What is the Meaning of Life? . . . [Laughter] Olson said one thing that I've been struggling with all my life. He said that the subjective as objective requires correct processing. Olson's students play around with that all their lives. Sharon Thesen, I think, is a person who really takes that on, the lyric form takes that on. *You* take that on—Lola Tostevin takes that on.

LLT: You see me as a lyric poet? Why?

FW: Because of the "I" in your poems. Lyric poetry is "I" centred.

LLT: But that's what I'm saying—there isn't one "I" in my poetry.

FW: OK. But my point is that I haven't concentrated lyrically on the "I." In the *Saskatchewan* book I use the second person as a way of deflecting the I/you.

LLT: Yes, but even in using the second person in *Saskatchewan*, there is still a sense of writer being the main subject of that book, whereas in *Music at the Heart of Thinking* you don't get that presence.

FW: Yeah . . . I find this very hard to talk about, because I haven't figured it out. It is something that I'm playing with in my poems, the whole notion of the self, of the selves, but I don't know where it's going. It bothers me a little. It seems to have something to do with—Daphne Marlatt, for example, uses the term "consciousness." I first heard it insisted upon by her. I was really bothered by it. The word "consciousness" doesn't feel like much that's tangible to me, but it's important to her, so I took some trouble to try to experience that word and experience what it meant. She talks about it in reference to proprioception and that makes sense to me: the experience of the "I" as proprioceptive vehicle; turning ourselves inside out and it's all one skin; the "I" as a kind of surface upon which the rest of the world meets. The notion of some "I" up here [points to his head] has always bothered me, consciousness up here. But Daphne points to herself down here [points to his stomach].

LLT: Maybe it's a meeting of the two.

FW: I put consciousness and conscience together and get guilt and thought. Being conscious is being aware—

LLT: What does that have to do with guilt? Consciousness and conscience are two separate terms.

FW: Same root.

LLT: I don't believe in the authority of roots or origins. I'm more interested in displacing authority—I don't know what originary meaning is. Definite definition? Well . . . let's talk about the dream-like quality of some of your images, as when you write that living on the prairies was like living under water. I don't mean dream in the sense of what happens when we're asleep, but in those kinds of images you use to apprehend the world.

FW: Images are very important to my poetics, images being both pictures and magic. Going back to roots, etymologically, image and magic are connected through that notion of now you see it and now you don't. I'm fascinated by the notion that you can create an image of something in your brain and it becomes true for you. I'm fascinated by the power of the

image. I heard wonderful things about cancer therapy that has to do with image making. I'm frightened to death by the fact that I'm creating cancer for myself, or that I'm creating Alzheimer's for myself—that we do this to ourselves. How do we control that? I think writers are close to being psychics when they are dealing with images and dreams. I mean, it's not so psychical, or otherworldly. It's not hallucinatory—it's literally part of a world that we can be in. I like to pay attention to that aspect of my writing . . . the image making. I really hate the term "psychic." What I mean is the literal meaning of the psyche at work.

LLT: Are those the images that belong to Lacan's "imaginary," those images that exist before we translate them through the symbolic of language.

FW: I guess I would agree that we get at them through language constructs.

LLT: One depends on the other. Except in our society we have been so preoccupied with the symbolic, language as effective tool, that we have repressed that side of us that makes the images and the rhythms that you were talking about. I've just written a review of Diana Hartog's book *Candy from Strangers* which I think is an incredibly good book. What I liked about it was how she retains that dream-like quality, the imagery, the imaginary that is expressed through the symbolic. They are so well integrated. Perhaps that's why I like *Music at the Heart of Thinking* so much—because it's also well integrated but at another level of play. It's that perfect tension you were talking about. You have the cadence, the rhythm, the feeling and the intellect. I like that.

FW: Well I do too. [Laughter] I think that's me. Music. Heart. Thinking.

LLT: It's refreshing to have the thinking part in there as well. Listening to you today, and having read both your poetry and articles, you seem unapologetic about using theory and intellect in your work. I find that in Canada there's a resistance to theory, a reluctance to accept intellectual ideas around writing. Why do you think that is?

FW: If people bother to read this at all—which they probably won't because it's about Fred Wah by Lola Tostevin, and people don't like us to talk about these things, Lola [laughter]—they may well cringe at the Olson references. I know that I'm frightened by what I don't know. I've tried to make use of the notion that Olson called the dance of the intellect. How does it go? The head by way of the ear to the syllable, and the heart by way of the breath to the line—the poetic line as the line to the heart and the syllable as the threshing floor of the intellect. The two units that one had to pay attention to in poetry were line and syllable. Except, of course, for those writers who continue to think that

story is the central feature of our world, exclusively. For me, intellect has always been a dancy thing, something to play with, and that's not usually the way intellect is thought of—as movement, as sparks that fly. The speed of thought. Certainly in *Music at the Heart of Thinking* I'm interested in the relationship between head and hand. A lot of that comes from doing free writing which most people do now. The synapse between thinking something and writing it fascinates me.

LLT: Do you do a lot of writing like that? I don't get the impression that *Music at the Heart of Thinking* was written like that. Don't you do a lot of rewrites?

FW: Every chance I get to change a piece, I'll change it, but I do a lot of writing by hand. I love that sense about the computer, that you can change things so easily. I had problems with a manuscript a few years ago. *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh* was a long poem, so that every time I changed one part of it, it had echo effects and I had to change a number of other pieces in it and it just got too trying to retype it. That's when I got onto the word processor. I've always believed, and like the notion, that the author is the authority in the writing, although I don't want to hang that heavily over the writing. Sometime people have been taken aback that I would change a poem after it's been published, but I will. If I have to type something up, send something to somebody, I'll have another go at it.

LLT: When you say that the author has the authority over the text, what do you think of reader as the authority over your text?

FW: Oh, that's getting interesting too. I'm just starting to think about that. The listener. By and large, I've not thought too much about the reader when I've written. I know the reader is there, that there's a listener at the back of my mind. Who that *is* has interested me, as a problem in writing. A friend of mine in Calgary, Jackie Fleming, was talking about that—the devaluation of the listener.

LLT: Devaluation from whose point of view?

FW: From everyone's point of view. In the language event, the listener might get it, might not get it, but the speaker/writer is the one who gets it all, so we devaluate the role of the listener. She was talking about this as a catholic construct. She's interested in re-evaluating the listener and devaluating the speaker.

LLT: Well there are many theorists who have been interested in making the reader her own writer of the text. Because of the obliqueness and difficulty of a series like *Music,* for example, the reader cannot be passive. Instead of devaluating the reader, it creates another writer. By

making her own connections, her own resolutions, the reader becomes the writer of your text.

FW: Yeah, OK. I'm a little curious about the connection, the relationship between the male/female thing. The listener being passive, female, receptacle and the writer being active—

LLT: Exactly, but with a series like *Music*, the reader can't be passive, she has to become active, to get anything out of the pieces.

FW: Oh, absolutely. I want to make the reader pay attention. . .

LLT: It's what Barthes called a writing of seduction versus a writing of conviction. You seduce the reader into taking an active part instead of convincing her into remaining passive. [Laughter]

FW: OOOhhh . . . [Laughter] I should really read those guys. They confirm everything we do . . . [Laughter]

LLT: You're going to Paris to work on a project. What's the new project you're working on?

FW: It's a series of poems called *The Gallery Series*—that's the working title anyway. It has to do with painting, photographs, reading a picture, responding to a picture, translating a picture, dealing with the problems around the artistic and technical problems. I've never had any training in the fine arts, so I don't really know what I'm doing—

LLT: That's probably better.

FW: [Laughter] Yes, it's probably better to know that you don't know what you're doing.

LLT: I mean if you're going to come to a painting to transcreate, to read it, as you did with *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*, it's best to come to it with no preconceived idea or academic training.

FW: Yes, I want to use it as a way to learn and train myself about the arts. I'm still very ignorant especially around painting. I love painting, paintings, but have had problems with technical aspects, such as the frame, the edges are so obvious. I've had problems with the economy of art, it's so expensive. I'm interested in the politics, the Marxist stuff around visual art, and what critics like John Berger have to say. I'm also just plain interested in going to a gallery and giving myself over to a painting that takes me in. There's this big Jackson Pollock painting at the Art Gallery in Buffalo and when I was a student there I used to go the Knox pretty often and I always found myself magnetically drawn to this

Pollock piece. It was a kind of stock stereotypical Jackson Pollock piece, but it was original and huge. I had expected my reaction to be oh well, it's a typical Pollock, it's helter skelter, then walk away. But I kept going back to that painting until I finally let myself be in it for a while. I love the sense of half closing the eyes the way you do when you want to see a painting at different angles, give yourself to the sensuousness of the painting. I've never written anything about that and I'm interested in articulating the images that surround that experience. So *The Gallery Series* is allowing me to do a number of things. It's allowing me to play—the form of the pieces is not set. Most of them are line poems so far, not necessarily prose poems. And they are allowing me to find out about the artist. I was thinking how visual art is more distant from its creator than writing because in writing there is usually such a strong identification of authority, but not so much in painting. I've always loved Josef Albers' stuff but I've never let myself write his name. To let yourself write that name in a poem requires a confidence of who that person is in terms of address. Many of the poems address the creator of the art, so that there's a second person in the poems. There's a you who usually made the painting.

LLT: It's a different concept from *Pictograms*. You didn't address a "you" in those pieces.

FW: It's still a transcreational process however. Moving something from one place to another. I'm using the painting as a way of generating the compositional elements that I want in the poem. So that's not so different from *Pictograms*, although there I wasn't concerned about who the author was. There's not that direct an address, but as soon as you ask the question "what does it mean," then you're really asking what the author or artist means. The whole world of meaning has to do with "authority"—with author, creator. Compositionally the process isn't that different.

LLT: How does that differ from, say, *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. Is that a transcreational process? The images that you were carrying with you.

FW: Except I wasn't using an object, a representation—

LLT: Weren't you using a representation of your father—

FW: I was using an apparition . . . . I don't mean apparition in any awful or scary sense—I'm always overjoyed when I see him. Wow, there he goes again. But I'm not able to hang on to the apparition long enough to make anything other than the event of "oh, I keep seeing my father since he's died and what's that all about." So it gets tossed back into a dishing out of memory, of sentimentalism, of nostalgia, working out feelings. It's a much more human or understandable kind of narrative than the playing around that artists do, though I think that playing around gets to be as

serious as those stories, as those narratives. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* is biography. My working with painting, I don't think, is biography. It may become biography, but the working in it isn't.

LLT: I find it hard to distinguish between the two. Tracing, graphing, to me can only be biographical. You said yourself before, that you write what's already there.

FW: Yeah . . . I don't know . . . Shirley Neuman is writing a chapter for something on *Waiting for Saskatchewan* as biography. That's why I'm using the term—it's not a term I usually use—but it made sense what she was saying. *Bio* . . . . I think working with a painting is more *geo*.

LLT: We've almost come to the end of the tape and I don't have a final question for you. I'll leave it up to you to say something brilliant.

FW: Something brilliant . . . Meaning is everything.

LLT: Meaning is everything . . . What do you mean by that?

FW: [Laughter] Well, Bowering is always on my ass to make my meaning clear. He's publishing a series called *Errata*—short prose pieces written from the same stance as *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, in a way. But George's at least make sense. [Laughter] I mean you can understand exactly what he's saying and he keeps telling me, "God, Fred, I wish yours made more sense, I wish they were easier to understand," and I keep saying to him, "Well I agree George, and I'm going to try harder to make them more understandable to more people."

LLT: And are you?

FW: Oh yeah. I want people to understand, I'm not trying to mystify, subvert meaning—

LLT: That's interesting because you said Nicole influenced you and she certainly wants to subvert—

FW: I deny it . . . I deny it. [Laughter]

LLT: You deny it . . . Well don't simplify too much—

FW: God, are you kidding?

From *Music at the Heart of Thinking*

seventy-five

horizon full red w/ a few clouds across the sky down to the river below Sentinel the dream gets dreary mist downstream the dam gathers up huge hackels into the air these freezing nights with the frost for the fog banks slunk against the tree-line each morning's memory of night travel and meeting place in the ditch grass what voice Plato thought dangered the elliptical island now that all this milk Simpson paddled past simply for the pay-off Fenollosa said wasn't there that's what autumn is this year.

seventy-seven

The world seems comfortably familiar and sometimes strangely familial so deja vu but when it becomes unfamiliar or down-town centre decentral displaced place of all things negative capability a positive incapability to not know knowing narrates not just Wordworth's big something else that is determines the rainbow of silence and noise with a clear dis-tortion at the edges of the supratactic acoustics at one end and cosmology at the other underneath dichten condensare ambiguous dysfunction fragmented rotten Rockies decidedly what's called fear of the hatchtop mountain or self-departure arrived and derived alter-native this making strange still oddly tied to earth no matter what.

eighty
(for Bill Sylvester)

Yesterday I was in Chinatown buying gai lan seeds.Chinese broccolli. The green, crunchy stalks, blanched, and ladled over with oyster sauce, make a fine lunch w/ rice, maybe some barbecued duck. This morning I am in my daughter's kitchen in Vancouver and I think of you and the gai lan. The connection isn't my choice; to me, your skin has always showed a flush, a quizzical pudeur. Will thought forever credit nonsense and the exact measurre of our hunger and our fever?

eighty-one
(for Karl Siegler)

Why then the one whirlpool when all the container two leaks depth through its seams splendour soaks the sands sprung three as song and not desire for the polar axle gravity gave no chance for four his meta(m) five outstripped his harrowing death lyric left over from six both but let him—us who want to be enduring messengers seven will so said the wept-for fountain's Lament one nine imaged water seeps from the mountainside maybe that's why we wait or spring's beach butterfly's touch informs new distances yet another story zinging motive you and your bike's antennae spanned earth but the words all over the edge thirteen taste comes thirsty

eighty-two
(for Bill Robertson)

Sometimes all it is is a simple interpolation not so falsely from the laws of narrative since you don't name her her perfumed head imaged quickly adolescent freedom and all possibility including everything to drink but maybe reading her she's my girl this pursuit meant to include marriage as soon as possible car job house who'd have thought smell could linger in lingo or car tires whisper the light that night right in front of all the happinesses prior to life and death love's same old story could be that's when meaning starts

eighty-seven

The distinct noise clarity makes from uncondemned memory beginning with small sheets of words turning very, very slowly slowing and knotting complete thoughts as sentences or fat stray objects probably stories of writing's reality dogs safely locked in waste land that far away from the perfect just goes to show what writers take for instance Bowering sans ing hopes for in a reader (confess it) mesmerized biotext not history not space but fear runs weeping from the imprint of fiction as a loaf of Triestian bread and all sorts of alibis for making sense right.

JUDITH ROCHE

Myrrh: A Study of Persona in H.D.'s *Trilogy*

Dream fragment: In a dream I am inside her ribcage and look out between gleaming bright white bars of ribs into a sky so blue it dazzles and hurts my eyes. I am very aware of her exquisitely formed ribs shaping the space of sky I see.

. . . Another dream: I have bought her old house, a three-story Victorian on Puget Sound. I figure, with pencils and paper, that I am the third inhabitant since she lived there. I'm planning the work on the house to reveal her essence through the architectural structure. She still lives in the dream but it is only through the house that I can know her. I am working on the house with loving attention to detail in order to be close to her.

. . . Third dream: I am directed to find out about her Ka. I know she wrote Kore and Ka but that is not what the direction tells me. It's her Ka, her double, that I am to search for.

The *Ka*, in the ancient religion of Egypt, is the second self, the immortal principle of a person, closely related to what we call spirit. The *Ka* was usually considered to remain in the other world for the duration of the body's passage on earth, while the *Ba*, the other double, stayed with the body. I had already been working with the idea of persona in H. D.'s *Trilogy* and had begun to wonder if there was a connection between *Ka* and persona. Both are connected to the self but are larger than the personal self. Both raise the question of what is behind the personal pronoun, the I, and suggest that whatever it is, it is multiple, not one and not indivisible.

Robert Elliott, in his discussion of personae, notes the curious contradiction of language that has our word *person,* which has come to mean something closely aligned to the essence of a human being, coming from the Latin *persona,* which is the mask an actor wore on stage. Latin usage is illustrated by this brief fable from *Phaedrus*:

> *Personam tragicam forte vulpus viderat*: (a fox, after looking by chance at a tragic actor's mask, remarked: 'O what a majestic face is here, but it has no brains!') (Elliott 19)

The mask of Dionysus, carried high in a celebratory processional, shows its larger-than-life face to the world but behind the mask is empty space. Yet the mask is transformative. From Paleolithic times on, to put on the mask signifies that the wearer is taking on something of a god's potency. This side of the mask reverses our usual assumptions, for we also speak of a mask as a "false front," hiding the true person behind it.

Dramatis Personae are the characters in a play. In classical Greek theater there would traditionally be only three actors, and a new character would be indicated by the same actor putting on a new mask. Persona is used in modern literary criticism to mean "speaker" in a poem, or main character, not to be confused with the poet him/herself, but an assumed character, a consciousness separate from other consciousnesses, who sees, reacts and reports on the events in the world of the poem.

In *Trilogy* there is such a first person narrator. She is a poet who wanders through war-torn London during the Blitzkrieg. There are other characters in the poem, some human, but most are Presences who appear and disappear in various forms, some merging into others, then back again. Robert Duncan talks about such personae as the "Eternal Persons of the Poem." They live, act and react within the poem. They appear in the poetry of many writers and though they are colored by each writer's individual consciousness, they seem to have a life of their own that continues in an unbroken thread as they variously surface or remain in the deep pools of literature. Hermes-Thoth-Mercury is one such persona. His name is changed depending on the context he finds himself in. Isis-Mary-Aphrodite, who also can appear as Astarte or Mary Magdalene, is another. Or maybe Mary Magdalene is a separate persona from the Isis, the Aphrodite, the Mary. They merge and then re-separate, taking and dropping masks as they choose.

H. D. stayed in London throughout World War II and she wrote constantly. *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the first book of *Trilogy*, was published during the last months of 1942; *Tribute to the Angels*, in 1944; and *The Flowering of the Rod* was written during the last months of 1944. She also wrote *The Gift*, a family memory dealing with her Moravian background during the war years. H.D. had come to London in 1911 with the wave of "expatriate" American writers who lived most of their adult lives in Europe but wrote with a particularly American point of view. She lived in Europe from 1911 until her death in 1962.

The First World War had been shattering for H.D., as it had been for so many others of her generation, but the Second World War left her excited, riding a crest of creativity she hadn't experienced in years.

H.D. and Bryher, her lover, patron (matron), and almost constant companion for most of her adult life, were living in Lowndes Square in London. They were joined by Perdita, H.D.'s grown daughter, who writes a charming memory of herself and her "two mothers" living together again as adult women while the bombs fell on London and H.D. was writing *Trilogy* and *The Gift*.

As more bombs fell and dropped nearer and yet nearer to their apartment, Bryher sensibly wanted to leave for Cornwall, where she owned a share in a farm. The Sitwells, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell, were kindly trying to get H.D. to stay at Renishaw, their family home in Derbyshire. H.D. steadfastly refused to leave London and the excitement of being part of the war. She wrote, in 1940, of the Battle of Britain:

> Now excitation rises like sap in a tree. I am happy. I am happier than I have ever been. It seems to me in my whole life . . . we were able, night after night, to pass out of the unrealities and the chaos of night-battle and see clear. If my mind at those moments had one regret, it was that I might not be able to bear witness to this truth, I might be annihilated before I had time to bear witness. I wanted to say, 'when things become unbearable a door swings open or a window.' (Guest 254)

The flood of poetry that World War II unleashed in H.D. came after long years of poetic silence. Her last poems, *Red Roses for Bronze*, had been published in 1931. In the ten year interim she had written novels but her major energy was taken up with her studies of the occult and her psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud. *Trilogy*, the first of the long poems that make up her later work, marks a change from her earlier poetry.

The early work, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is also full of persona poems. She speaks in the voice of Hermes, of Calypso, of Circe, of Zeus, of many "eternal persons of the poem," but the poems are visions of a larger-than-life reality. In the long poems of the more mature work, written after the decade long hiatus, the serious study, the searching self-analysis, and the divine forces all appear in the poem as Presences. They speak through her, instead of from her, in a new manner. When H.D. returns to poetry after the process of turning inward, she is ready to take on the function of the poet-seer-prophet who is speaker to and for the community. She is "bearing witness" as the whole world is in the chaos of destruction. *The Walls Do Not Fall* opens:

> An incident here and there,
> and rails gone (for guns)
> from your (and my) old town square:
>
> mist and mist-grey, no colour,
> still the Luxor bee, chick and hare
> pursue unalterable purpose
>
> in green, rose-red, lapis;
> they continue to prophesy
> from the stone papyrus:
> (*WDNF* 1)

She starts with community. It is "your" and "my" old town square. It's "our" rails that are gone for guns. But she cuts immediately to Egypt and the hieroglyphs of the bee, chick, and hare (which she will re-echo in *Helen in Egypt*) "pursue unalterable purpose." This is both purpose and message to us of purpose. *The Walls Do Not Fall* is dedicated to Bryher and a note before the poem says, "for Karnak 1923, from London 1942." Bryher and H.D. traveled to Egypt in 1923, the year the sepulchral chamber of the tomb of Tutankhamen was opened and some of its secrets studied.

This event loomed large in the popular imagination and manifested itself in an interest in things Egyptian; this greatly influenced the styles and fashions of the early 1920s. The event particularly carried potency for H.D. In the first stanzas of the poem written seventeen years later, she is establishing her poetics of finding keys to the present in the sacred Knowledge of the past:

> the tomb, the temple; enter,
> there as here, there are no doors:
> . . .
>
> ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof
> leaves the sealed room
> open to the air,
>
> so, through our desolation,
> thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us
> through gloom:
> (*WDNF* 1)

The bombed-out churches of London remind her of the opened tombs of Karnak and she finds a breath of fresh air and possibility through the devastation.

"Pompeii has nothing to teach us," she continues. Though she is evoking dead civilizations she knows there is no escape in time. Joseph Riddel, in his essay on H.D.'s "spiritual realism," says, "The discovery of *The Walls Do Not Fall* is that man cannot turn away from the present into the past but must add his own writing to the wall if it is not to fall" (466). Any single moment in history contains the pattern of essential experience which informs all time. Throughout *Walls*, H.D. is going for pattern by wrestling meaning from chaos.

> the bone-frame was made for
> no such shock knit within terror,
> yet the skeleton stood up to it: