

remembers the future. Jacques Derrida would see what is happening in Liebhaber's conversion through love:

It is because writing is *inaugural*, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future. (*Writing and Difference*, cited in *Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 44)

The tyranny of meaning looms, but the writer does not begin as tyrant or satrap. Even the historian, when he is writing beautifully, does not know what his next sentence about the past will say.

In *Gone Indian* (1973) the chronicler is probably a conscious liar. Professor Madham writes a long letter to Jill Sunderman, with a transcription (and comments) of Jeremy Sadness's audiotapes sent back to the university at Binghamton from their miraculous survival in Alberta, where Jeremy faked a new life and maybe a death. Envious of his student, concerned about his own reputation, and finally considering the possibility of seducing Miss Sunderman, Madham has probably edited the tapes drastically, and also provided some original fiction of his own. The text is a lie within a lie--in other words the stuff of history, as a cynic would say. And the author, Robert Kroetsch? If he seduces the reader, it is not only the past he is fucking.

Jeremy Sadness is the most obvious among Kroetsch's figures who have trouble with the printed word. His namesake, Jeremy Bentham, may have challenged completion by having his body preserved for his successors to view. But Sadness's problem occurs far before the "Terrors of Completion." He is supposed to be writing a Ph.D. dissertation, but he never gets beyond a title, many of which he suggests in a comic fashion in his messages to Madham. Madham, who had left the west for a bookish life in the east, contrasts Jeremy's "perverse dreaming" with what he calls "my careful accounting for his end" (p. 101), that is his craft of continuity and completion.

So that though the reader, along with Jeremy's wife Carol, looks on the spectacular disappearance of Jeremy and Bea from the high level bridge (and especially the survival of the tape recorder) with a jaundiced eye, Madham, whatever his reasons, looks for a traditional and realist denouement. He scoffs at Miss Sunderman's term, "the mystery." "I am certain," he writes, "that Jeremy and Bea were killed" (p. 150). Then in a travesty of documentationism, he recites a list of facts and figures, having gone to "the original records of the now defunct Grand Trunk Pacific to get the exact

details" (p. 151). For several pages he marshals logic and fact against Carol's "imagination," finally using the techniques of fiction (as F. did regarding the end of Katherine Tekakwitha) to "re"create the dramatic final scene of the runaways' story. It is told in the terms of approved Canadian naturalism: "The water below is indifferent; through a labyrinth of rivers and lakes, it falls off and down, to Hudson Bay, to Baffin Island, to the drifting Arctic wastes" (p. 157).

Yet it is totally unlike a scholar, a historian, a custodian of the past and the recorded word, that Professor Madham disposes of the documents. Note this portion of a sentence: "... in ordering his fragments of tape (and I had to destroy them, finally; they were cluttering up my office) . . ." (p. 154). Ordering of fragments is the job of a modernist and/or a historian. Destroying them is the rejection of evidence. The cluttering up of his office is an unlikely story.

Jeremy's story, on the other hand, whether seen by Madham or not, is the story of the present myth-loving west, the deconstructing of a life and making of a legend, the opting for space over time, the choice of silence over the continuous talk of history. Making his epic lonely trek across the snow, Jeremy identifies with Scott of the Antarctic, surrendering language: "You are right to make the last entry and close the notebook, let the pencil slip from your hand. You have only to listen now. Say no more. Listen to the fall of silence . . ." (p. 40). When Jeremy was the child of a disappearing father, the little tailor across the hall would lend him the books of Grey Owl, hoping that the child would grow up to be a professor. Instead, Jeremy, whose name means uplifted by God, took Grey Owl as a model of the man vanished from his historical imperative into an invented life. Stepping from the United States with its Jeffersonian illusion that it had been selected as the stage of history, into the snow carnival of western Canada, Jeremy says: "This whole damn country, I thought to myself, they're all trying to vanish into the air" (p. 9). As Michael Ondaatje told us regarding the testimony of the trumpeter, it is no easy task writing "the history of air."

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Life in the west, where the layers are layers of earth rather than tiers of written records, is lived in metonymy rather than metaphor. Here is what Kroetsch said in conversation with a younger western writer involved with place:

The notion of trans-
ference that's involved in metaphor moving from

one place to another And I think it's that moving
that we distrust That's why we aren't historians
we're archaeologists We want to see the thing
in its place what we want to do is record exactly
where it's sitting where it's found and not make
any assumptions not disrupt the ground and then
read from there And that's why it becomes one hell
of a task in reading because you have to read so
bloody hard because the text hasn't been manipulated . . .
We leave things where they're found (from "The
Remembrance Day Tapes," *Island 7* [1980]: 46-47)

Connect nothing, said F., to his unhappy historian.

If, as the dramatic necessitarians say, history is a ship we are all sailing on, then literature might be a stowaway on history. If it succeeds it owes nothing to history. If it fails, if it is found out, it is the prisoner of history. Some of our novelists, at last, are finding out that they are not necessarily wanted on the voyage.

They might tell the rest, including the readers of the rest, what *Alibi's* narrator Dorf tells Karen, who is loaded down with her cameras, notebooks, and watches: "Get with it Speak our language. Forget about history. Make do."

CORRESPONDENCE: MAY 1976 - DECEMBER 1977

Selected and Edited
by Steve McCaffery

The correspondence that follows is an edited selection written between three writers of sympathetic yet divergent interests. Charles Bernstein is a New-York based writer and founder (with Bruce Andrews) of the highly acclaimed and catalytic magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (recently reprinted as The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book by Southern Illinois University Press). Ron Silliman is a San Francisco writer and editor of the magazine Tottel's. Steve McCaffery is a Toronto-based writer, a contributing editor of Open Letter, co-founder with bpNichol of T.R.G. (Toronto Research Group) and a member of the sound performance ensemble The Four Horsemen.

The letters cover a period of concentrated correspondence from May 1976 to December 1977. The ideas contained were highly provisional, early attempts to conceptualize a process that had, in both Canada and the U.S., become stultified in an academic context and for the most part rejected or ignored by those previously in opposition to the academics.

The numerous contributors to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E have been frequently lumped together as proponents of a de-referentialist "school" of writing. This is not the case. Though many contributors conceived the practice of writing to be primarily a social fact and saw the production of meaning as occupying, with a certain inevitability, a socio-political position within the politics of representation, there was never a suggestion of a unitary group or movement. The letters reveal many of the differences felt in the early struggles of post-referential conceptualization outside of academic discourse and show the lively spirit of agreement and disagreement in areas as diverse as ciphericity, witnessing, matrices, floating signifiers, film, a language of the group, aporetic ontology, Lukacs and Anthony Braxton.

Steve McCaffery
Toronto Nov. 1984

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RON SILLIMAN - STEVE McCAFFERY
MAY 1976 - NOVEMBER 1976

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3028 California, San Francisco, CA 94115
10 May 76

Dear Steve McC.,

. . . . I've got a prosepoem called "Language Games" wch offers not very humbly a provisional definition of the poem. While my own thot on this subject has been moving rapidly forward in the months since it was written, I'd like to hit you w/ about 1/15th of it, just to see what response that might trigger:

. . . a rough, preliminary definition of the poem. Stated schematically, it is:

$$p = \frac{v \cdot r}{i}$$

a poem, p , is a vocabulary, v , with a set of rules, r , by which to process it, limited or extended variously by intention(s), i ; this is not, however, a pseudomathematical proposition, subject to such variations.

Without having been proposed in so many terms, it is nevertheless this articulation which is the social implication in their (i.e., Coolidge's and Grenier's) work. Each term in the equation of course is subject to a number of clarifications. A vocabulary, for example, need not be in words nor in words only (thus DeJasu). Conversely, the equation makes possible the inclusion of such work as Antin's talking pieces or the journals of Hannah Weiner in the same universe of the poem as Creeley or Turner Cassity even while separating out work which, while it may possess many of the surface features of a poem, lacks some essential, such as the songs of Bob Dylan or certain magazine advertisements, which lack intention. It is, insofar as is possible in the

rough and social domain of language, a pure state.
Nothing on the right hand side of the equation is gratuitous (as syntax is, since it is not the only set of rules available), capable of removal . . .

I'd be interested in hearing what you've got to say.

Best, Ron Silliman.

52 Claxton Blvd.
Toronto, Ont., M6C 1L8
5 July 1976

dear ron:

$$p = \frac{v \cdot r}{i} \quad ?$$

i would say that the equation covers many areas but wd hardly account for, say, the aleatoric work of Dick Higgins, Mac Low and myself. In that there seems to be an ambiguity begging in the schema as you present it:

a) a set of rules (r) by which to process a vocabulary suggests to me a description of the pre-poetic area of composition itself which may in itself arrive at an object that bears little or no relevance to intention. Mac Low seems to be deliberately involved in non-intentionality and though you might argue that such involvement "is" intention it wd still lie outside your schema. procedural and processual seem useful, indeed, critical distinctions here.

b) another response: your equation describes the poem from a single viewpoint only: that of authorship. if we try to forget about author for a second and think of the two terms of a text and a reader, then i can't see how the definition can operate. i may be missing something here but it seems that, at base, a vocabulary (v) is the only thing a reader has. the most exciting aspect of non-referential writing for me is precisely the subjectlessness of the whole, the confrontation of a reader with a linguistic opacity that forces him out of consumption into production. so that the social implication of readership becomes an implication of labour, of who actually produces a text, or in this case, who co-produces.

the decisive advantage is surely that the reader becomes producer and shares in that energy of production that the writer has gone through: i.e. the reader's reading becomes a writing.

regards,
steve mcc.

Wednesday, July 21 1976

Steve,

yr objection of p (the equation) not covering aleatoric works, wch wld be, as you see it, w/o intention. even randomness is a set of specific mathematic possibilities, so while word placements may not be made w/ decisions as such to them, there is an intention to arrive at such a type of text & that is one level of what i (intention) is, and for me a key one, the whole view a writer has of what poetry, for him or her, is, each poem p fitting into a dialectic, the poem which seems to be needed at that point. (I view poets in their social behavior as akin to molecules of gas in a space, with each molecule or point being a poet, none able to see the whole field, only those points nearer to them, schools representing denser areas, etc, & each poem is conceptualized, however vaguely, as somehow fitting into a 2nd, but simultaneous field of poems, where the point stands & where the poem stands & where the poem fits are also conditions of i (intention) and yr work, higgins, Mac Low, my own aleatoric works all have such levels.) the very presence of the text or performance indicates, to me, an intention that there be a poem. both procedure & process, as i understand them, are conditions of i . it is not, as i see it, outside the schema.

second problem you had: that p described the poem only from the author's view (here is the area where yr objection most brought my own thinking forward, danke). p describes the structure of the poem, which is *always* transformed by whichever state it occurs in & as i see it there are roughly five such states (as concept, as the act of writing [projective], as text, as act of reading [affective], as memory or recall). we only see p in its transformations, much like Chomsky's Universal Grammar is only present in its particularities. we need a much better understanding of those transformations, tho that may be a strictly critical need (whereas I see theory as directly contributing to practice or of no use at all, distinct from theory as explanation). different schools of poets & critics tend to focus on

the *p* on a different state & argue that such is the true condition of poetry (for example, Carle Andre, Yoko Ono etc wld be examples of *p* as concept reality, Olson as Projective, New Critics as Text, Stanley Fish (Surprised by Sin etc) as Affective, and a few workers (especially Bill Berkson) as memory state. in the affective I think the reader gets more than just a vocabulary (*v*) but a combination of vocabulary and rules together (*v* & *τ*) wch may or may not reveal intention (in fact, for several years . . . I stated that poetry was a language & a set of rules, that is I used that affective definition sans recognition of such.

let me know what you think,

Ron.

52 Claxton Blvd. Toronto, Canada M6C 1L8
26 Oct. 1976

dear ron:

felt your replies to my questions in the *p* equation pretty substantial and found little i disagreed with, although at some point you mention an unclarity on my use of procedure/process. well, it's more or less in agreement with the way you phrase it in the following (the less being that i dont entirely see Procedure as "a set of rules which determines (in advance often, as in Mac Low's work much of the time, such as the acrostic systems in *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*) the text from a specific vocabulary."

i dont see how it would follow necessarily that a text wd be determined from a specific vocabulary, the whole point in much procedural work being the location of *í*-activity (intentionality) within the generation and initial implementation of a movement (procedure) in the course of which movement a text generates itself. *í*-activity centres upon establishing the conditions for text-generation and might be likened to a second level vocabulary, itself involved in a meta-textuality. procedure i see then, as a set of rules designed to mobilize a language act whose end product is indeterminate. the vocabulary need not be specific, nor the text determined by the procedure. procedure, i say, *is* vocabulary, just as much as it is verb operative on a three dimensional, contextual level.

your description of *process* is accurate, though my own personal handling of the term emphasizes a more or less metalinguistic activity, or rather a doubling reflex by which the writer writes about his process. as such, the term serves more as content than as formal strategy.

regarding procedure: your definition is fine and certainly applies to the Mac Low example of the extended acrostic . . . but what i'm trying to insist is that this definition is not totally embracing. also the point about an *z*-activity displacement from "text" (as both zone and structure-emergent) to "project" (i.e. all the necessary pre-textual activities that set a text off into self-generation. it's an *z*-function as condition-mongering rather than text-creator.

Steve.

3028 California SF 94115
11.8.76

dear steve --

busy around here: going to be giving a symposium w/ an orthodox marxist (walter benjaminist) & a castroite on Poetry & Politics for the SF Art Workers Coalition: going to go into the social origins of referentiality (wch are, of course, in the labor process of capitalism itself: referentiality is language serialized, its dual projection as product & commodity resolved by the repression of its product nature (wch in precapitalist groups of the third world often shows in "nonsense" syllables, in western groups shows in the ordering of ancient closed poems by physical systems [rime]; serialized, language takes on the optical illusion of a great new descriptive capacity; precapital people could discuss the world but not describe it; thus we get Wittgenstein's central complaint, that we were held captive by a picture & cld not get outside it because it lay in our language & language repeated it to us inexorably. social being creates consciousness (in this sense, every point in the matrix needs to be seen as a determinate coordinate of language & history). the linguistic parallel of the commodity fetish is a narrative fetish (this shows both the correctness of dialectical procedure & the historical error of orthodox marxian views of literature, especially Plekhanov & Lukacs). the question is: since all art aims at perception of dialectical consciousness (the energy one feels in any art wch works), the question is: does one seek "whole" language in that

language of the past, that preserialized vocabulary/syntax, or in the future. i think the latter, because the pre-capital dual projection was equal to a contradiction in the social fact, product versus commodity. the unserialized language of product nature is something wch can only be invented or can only arise w/ a changed social fact in the future, to wit revolution.

responding to the particulars of yr letter: yes a text is determined by a specific vocabulary, tho it can be as generally stated (in most cases) as "ordinary speech" (wch is a concept not a social fact, a reality of the personal matrix [distinct from the social matrix, the objective matrix or the "official" matrix].

aRb, in fact, is the terminology i use to discuss a specific poem from my book *NOX*, "tuna flesh," in which i identify the vocabulary as being (a) tuna & (b) fish, w/ (R) the rule, creating the 3rd term "flesh." thus nearly every vocabulary can be said to include terms wch never appear in the transformational state wch is the text.

yr right: procedure is vocabulary as much as rule, the point is well taken. my personal take on the procedure/process relationship wld be to identify the former w/ say Steve Reich, the latter w/ Anthony Braxton (in fact, instead of a jazz/serious music binary system, i think what's developed is a process/procedure one).

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non-referentiality: this is simply the attempt to void commodity language by specific context, a negation: thesis-antithesis. what is needed is the *next* step: a future synthesis to a post-serial collective language, a language of the group not the series. i'm for post-referentiality, even tho i don't today really have a full grasp as yet as to what that wld be.

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i think that one can see the history of modernism as a series of attempts to reunify serialized language & think i can point to the specific deforming process wch eventually destroys each attempt. there are two specific types, however, wch are less deformed by their social fact than the others: russian futurism & language-centred writing. because both aimed consciously at the language & because significant forces w/in both groups (tho not in all their members in either case) saw the necessity of joining it w/ revolutionary thot & action.

visual poetry is a more recent manifestation of precisely the same projection wch gave rise to the novel. a failing to recognize the absolute grounding of the matrix of the poem in language as such. in the serialized poem, language receded and writers began to work

on a matrix wch they saw as narrative freely evolving (but nothing ever FREELY evolves, for that wld be to separate from its historical base): thus we got the novel, wch began to flounder when it got too far away from its source & wch took the typical capitalist defence mechanism of displacing its contradiction thru technological development, leaping, literally, into film, imposing itself on the then-totally latent matrix of cinema. the history of avant garde or personal cinema is in fact a recognition that the matrix of historical film did not inherently require the axis of narrative. however, i think it fails to recognize that once established, a matrix cannot erase its planes, poetry cannot erase language or history. hence the "failure" of personal film to establish itself as anything other than a minor tendency w/in the total social fact. To see the possibility of what film cld have been, see the russian silent film Man With A Movie Camera by Vertov, (a total parallel to russian futurism, save that he was working in a field wch at the time had virtually no matrix at all), 1929. needless to say, he was crushed by stalinism (state capital: the narrative [commodity] fetish of socialist realism). i think visual poetry represents an historically later projection of the same inner mechanics (ditto the inverse reality: art language, The Fox, Kosuth & Ramsden). i'm not sure what its future history will be, but i think it will involve the same historical leap at some point.

let me go back a step here. when capitalism serialized consciousness in general, it clearly deformed language. it also partially serialized all the senses. imagine, as an analogy, the whole society losing its ability to perceive color. it wld be exactly like that. &, i think our historical ability to see color has been muted and that this is what explains the "enhanced" color schemes of LSD, wch breaks down that repression. in such a world, the visual arts wld alter their matrix, giving greater stress to the dimensions of line, shape, texture (wch in fact has occurred). the most interesting thing to me about visual poetry is that, w/ a few exceptions, it is an art wholly of line, shape, texture, wholly serialized.

i dont mean that as an attack as such on it (having used some of its technological developments in my own work), for it can be used to explore just such social facts, but i think its total historical possibility is one of doom, that for it to be revolutionary wld require it to re-group w/ the Poem (its matrix), much as i expect the historical re-grouping of both the novel and literary criticism (wch is self-consciousness of an object now separated from the serialized object of the poem) to the Poem. in short, i see an end to these "genres" in a revolutionary period, their positive aspects to be a part of poetry as such.

i think that the visual aspect of the sign (wch occurs w/ the invention of writing) reveals that w/ writing the very first type of serializing the language occurs. historically, writing is a necessary development, but in a sense it was a terrible psychic disaster for us all. it moved part of the language outside of ourselves for the first time.

Ron.

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STEVE McCAFFERY - CHARLES BERNSTEIN

SEPTEMBER 1976 - DECEMBER 1977

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52 Claxton Blvd., Toronto, Ont. M6C 1L8
14 September 1976

Dear charles:

. . . in levi-strauss' use of the term, your argument wd take on an interesting departure. Silliman's work, for instance, wd appear to be "a naturalization of the cultural" understanding that the word (as a pure graphic event or as close to that as possible, i.e. the word as a self-sustaining signifier with no external reference) is a self-demonstrating unit of the "natural" which becomes *culturalized* by way of connotation and reference. to take your argument and apply it to the linguistic plane wd show Silliman to be one of the most NATCHURAL of writers around today.

Silliman's work has always impressed me by its ontological self-sufficiency: a self-sufficiency inherent in the shaping and duration of his pieces. the other important thing with this type of work is to approach it from the readerly rather than writerly standpoint. i think it's easy as writer writing about writer to slip into a subconscious zone of sympathetic attraction that has basically nothing to do with that task at hand which is a productive engagement with text. when it all boils down to the nitty, isn't author nothing more nor less than a semiotic unit itself? simply a signature that signifies "responsibility"?

"Syntax" tends to be an umbrella term. stein somewhere talks about the distinction between syntax and distribution: that there can be an act of scattering which is necessarily retrieved by the reader as a sense of order simply because of the enforced consecutiveness of any sequential sign system.

do you know the work of Jacques Derrida? especially his concept of linguistic deferral ("différance") and his notion of the linguistic trace? you might pick up on him if you haven't done so already. he gives a very heavy defence of what you're doing aesthetically here.

steve.

464 Amsterdam Ave., New York, N.Y. 10024
23 September 1976

Steve,

the structuralist approach. well, look at *Palukaville* & see what you think of my questioning of the implication that poetry (artworks, language) are only possible systems not intrinsic to "reality"/"nature"/non-relativistic truth/the "thing" itself, i.e., that there's something "deeper" than the specific elements & syntax of language wch somehow the language refers to. a sort of quinean ontological relativity in wch language is culture/mythology . . . one of a number of possible structures . . . as distinct from "nature," "objects" or whatever you call it. (levi-strauss presumably believes, as does chomsky, in depth structures; Quine wld stay empirical/behaviorist but insist that in radical translation from one language to another nothing of significance ["the null case"] is lost.) my own inclination -- & i think this is the pt of effacing reference ("emptying language of its signifiers") that directs away from the words themselves -- is to see significance precisely in that wch is particular of our language, its body, & if making a distinction between language (in the sense of culture, agreement in judgement, etc) & truth (nature, objective reality, etc) then only to allow that these are not two & still to put off simple monism. aspects of the one thing -- co-extensive, interpenetrating: one the "best picture" of the other. language is human because it is all that is apprehensible. there is a kind of structuralist sensibility that devalues the language (the event, the artwork, . . .) by regarding it as a semiotic code . . & goes on to talk of irony, etc, a dandyism that to me is an avoidance of the love of the thing itself . . the recognition that the thing is before us. (rehearsing this critique in my mind while visiting my brother, i was struck by how much he has the sensibility i'm talking abt, with no great moral loss, & wondering abt this straw man i'm projecting from my fears. not that i don't think i'm right . . my brother wasn't maintaining these ideas intellectually, as an argument, but it was just his way of fronting that primal lack, absence of experiencing one's own experience, disconnection, etc, : "sadness.") . . . So, yes, i'd agree to that twist you speak of: Silliman's work is the most natural, i.e., getting at the re-naturalization of the cultural, presenting the non-relative ground "ontological self-sufficiency" of nature. A piece of nature.

"syntax" is overused. yr (stein's) distinction between the order put on "distributed" words by a reader wld certainly be a key one to, say, Mac Low's work -- but i think with Stein & Silliman & Mayer etc, the "responsibility" of the "semiotic unit" of authorship is the assumption that since these distributed words are *poems* then they are *meant*, i.e., syntax (even if derived by random distribution) is asserted. obviously, Mac Low's work argues against this assumption (tho Mac Low himself has backtracked on this). as far as i can see, this is a/the key area for theoretical discussion.

i'm glad you like *Signs of the Particularities*. yr description of it was amazingly accurate to my own perceptions & the clearest i've heard. don't know derrida but will try to get a hold of his books.

Charles.

464 Amsterdam Ave., New York, N.Y. 10024
[n.d. but prior to June 29 1977]

Steve,

had a longish phone call with Jackson Mac Low last night -- he's a mighty fine person to chat with. i let slip something abt "progressive" writing or else & he pointed out he didnt believe in progress, didnt like the term avant garde, what impressed him abt poetry was never that it dealt with certain formal "cutting edge" concerns, but with the inner integrity of the wrk regardless of the mode -- that he thought what characterized "our" wrk (say wrk that owes something to Mac Low or that has concerns of Coolidge & looks back to Schwitters and is involved specifically with using collage as a basic compositional technique) was not that it was more advanced but that it was located on a topographic schema closer to the visual arts. wch has been of some concern to me -- i.e. how to deal with elitism & the avoidance of para-military self-conception often involved in avant gardism (as if poetry was working twrd some "advance" outside of faithfulness to itself, outside of the necessity of language having the most meaning any of us can give to it. yet, must be sd, i dont find "straight" poetry very interesting to read & basically have not read whole realms of wrk & do experience a sense that in some kinds, some modes, right now there is something happening that doesnt seem like just another mode but the most - - - (what to call it?) anyway, what i like abt yr

article on Mac Low was that it brought out the architectural considerations now active in writing poetry -- so that rather than dwell on the implications of random process & formula derived works you focussed in on how various ways of organizing language can give an extra charge of meaning creating strong poems. at the beginning of our correspondence we were getting a little bit into what might be a philosophical difference between us -- in respect to my critique of structuralism, conceptual art, deduced process art, etc - - - but the more i see of yr wrk & thought the less i see this difference making that much of a difference. because it's obviously true that, as elements in the composition, any method goes -- as long as you mean it -- that it's a work that makes sense -- all the way through. . . . i'm in a somewhat skeptical mood today i guess on a couple of things -- another being what the relation between theoretical positions abt wrtng & the praxis is -- i mean you cld have the correct line, so to say, & be a pretty crummy writer, &, what's really multievident, have some "mistaken" theoretical notions & be great. maybe the criteria of quality is ultimately more along the "make it new" line -- with my own twist that i like to give to that perception (essentially i take it the insistence that everything in the work has to be necessary. no dross, no pro forma unthought rhetoric) that if you push anything far enough, get imbedded enuf in the vocabulary & syntax operation etc, it's bound to be a strong work, wch can reduce to the old visionary argument i suppose

one thing that *Dr. Sadhu's* and *Ow's Waif* made me rethink was my use of prior texts (vocabas) in my own wrk -- wch has been pretty extensive. When you say Mac Low's "writing becomes a written record of observation" it seems to me that this descriptive tact was really the right way to talk abt what's going on -- really it explains a certain kind of *regard* to wrtng that both you & i have in common & is far more crucial a way of talking than talking abt "randomness" or "image" &c.

A friend recently sd that one of the strongest characteristics of my wrtng was a sense of *witness*, by wch he meant specifically the distancing form experience that runs thru *Parsing* -- looking at yr life go by while at the same time being in it is the way i've expressed it at times -- wch actually is the attitude twrd language itself, the thing thru wch we experience, see things as one thing or another, as meanings -- wch, in wrtng, we want to look at, regard, ie making poetry that kind of wrtng wch is involved with witnessing language, so therefore a language reflexive process. Take a step back, Spicer says, & look at the sentence. Exactly. . . . "The record of observation" is not of the "world" at least in the sense of

the naive concept of the physical world, tho maybe the world in the Tractatus sense ("the world is everything that is the case") but an observing, a looking out onto, language. I remember in writing "Asylum" & the first section of *Parsing* being very aware of the sense that what i was doing was almost a sociology/anthropology, mapping out realms of language (wch in *Signs of the Particularities* became a kind of collecting function) wch is similar to remarks you make in yr afterword to *Ow's Waifs*. Though recently i've become more interested in making the vocabulary my own letters & ntbks & for a combination of reasons but mostly because it's the material right now i find most compelling to work with. The issue, as it is alive with me, is very much whether yr gonna see wrtng as a subject or an object -- when Mayer (Bernadette) wld say, & her wrds still ring in my ears, you gotta tap the wrtng -- it destroys wrtng to think of it as an object, as plastic (cf Mac Low's remarks abt us being closer to the visual arts -- because we see words as stuff to be cut out and arranged??) while at the same time, i have little interest in what i just write down, as such -- but lately the point has been to synthesize the two things -- wch is what i think Hannah Weiner is doing ie to think that by being interested essentially in witnessing the language you somehow are not living it out -- somehow thinking it's one either/or is just that classic oft repeated self-crippling dualism -- IN AND BESIDE i want to scream. Barrett Watten has recently tried to explain his uncertainty abt my wrk on the account that i dont clearly enuf separate structure from decisions made within the structure. He wld prefer to see a poetry where you can apprehend a consistent "structural myth" (programmatic strategy) & thus read into the various choices made within the matrix that has been agreed upon. In other wrds -- & he uses Silliman's matrix theory to put this view forward -- & he if you get value (meaning) relative only to a given matrix then you cant (or shldnt) call into question the matrix itself -- youve got to make yr moves within the matrix & let that stand as the border. I had argued that it's also possible to turn the matrix in on itself -- to allow somehow the language to obtrude/intrude into the matrix itself. I get the sense that what he argues for is really a kind of relativism that bothers me, it's too simple-minded in the wrong way -- but i feel a little confused abt concretely what it all means. Obviously silliman's wrk is the best show we have of clearly delineating the structure & keeping it consistently distinct from the "content" ie what you do within the structure. On the other hand, our diad [ed. note, *Legend*, pp. 155-160] in its "inter-textual" way is involved with one discourse emerging from & plunging back into another . . . a play between matrixes -- the "deconstruction" of "structural myths" as the language turns in on itself. What seems exciting abt our diad, to me, is that it doesnt simply use "cut-up"

language or neologisms to create a unified field of meaning on one plane, but actually calls into play notions of variant simultaneously existing realms of discourse constantly criss-crossing, intersecting, creating new gells, new forms -- very much the description that Wittgenstein uses to describe language -- as a city with some streets straight & narrow, other windy &&&. Thinking abt this it becomes clearer how collage, as a basic technique, is a fundamental explanation for where this intertextuality comes from. For if you can juxtapose variant phrases together (often with an eye for an evenness of surface texture) why not juxtapose kinds of discourse? Is that what you mean by "intertextual"? . . . anyway, the kind of wrk i mean is one whose meaning lies in its relation to other -- identifiable, standardized, genre -- modes of discourse -- so that the wrk becomes a kind of edifying discourse, the units -- sentences -- of it not meant for their descriptive content nor even for the infrareferential hum as sound & juxtaposition (ie the language centered poem) but as a comment on other discourse modes -- so a kind of Brechtian wrtng. (it flashes that the Brechtian "alienation effect" is to the point, but then how to avoid the pitfalls of theatricalizing language ???)

Dr. Sadhu's seems to be more involved in an investigation into the making of meaning, involved with opening up the door to reading in a different way, but the simple display of alternative forms of making meaning is alone not enuf -- wrk that really attracts me has an impermeability that this open field is really counter to -- while this stuff is an opening up that gives the mind plenty of room to move around, associate, pass over -- what i mean by impermeable wrtng is its opacity, charged with an electric density you cant get through. Now i understand that part of the aesthetic of what i'm weirdly calling the open field is, as you say, "w/o the intrusion of my own consciousness" but that way of wrtng seems problematical to me, even given what i say above abt my own similar experience, because in the end it's the intentionality of wanting a particular sequence or arrangement to wrds to stand as a poem out of a sense of necessity, its internal integrity . . .

The distinction i wld draw separates random inspired procedural decision making from the use of a particular procedural method (or several simultaneously) & working out what will end up in the poem as you go along (in situ) so that each "reading" you choose (wch is to say each poem) presses back at you, you *mean* it.

Charles.

52 Claxton Blvd., Toronto, M6C 1L8
29 June 77

dear charles:

regarding supply texts & that whole interface with found/collage & written readings. what you assert is "a regard to writing" i see as an almost ethical concern for the substance of language, a respect for it as both an availability and an alterity -- an approachable otherness -- what Jonathan Williams called the fostering of a humane neighbourliness with materials. your term WITNESS (as you explain in your letter) is very close to this kind of regard, this resistance to intruding with that kind of egophallic blindness that borders on a schizophrenic unawareness of language's own physis. so the regard for language takes the double form of an action within it and an observation from without. the power of this is paradoxical: to be within language one must be without it.

perhaps we can approach speech as an attraction to the use values of language, whereas writing can remove it from use and permit this witnessing. (i wd extend this last remark to include under the aegis of writing much recent tape composition which, i'm finally convinced, relates more to writing than to orality. taped sound being a contextualizing of language within a system of retrievability & repeatability.)

perhaps the issue (as you raise it through Bernadette Mayer) is not the either/or of object/subject, but the possibility through writing to be neither. i'm increasingly convinced that the sign, the written mark, is possessed of an inner logic of contradiction (a logic of illogic) and that this is the area to explore in our work. i.e. (& e.g.) how a sign that is a present mark functions only to point to an absent term; how writing involves a fundamental rupture with context and origin (& so the inevitable dead-end of projectivism with its valorization of the syllable and breath as some kind of present moment of speech).

in our own work (language centered, cipheral, whatever we want to call it) this structural contradiction manifests itself and demonstrates its own structural play within our witnessing. i.e. to say we actually gain "experience" through a defect in experience on another level. this strategic contradiction is evident in your own work *Signs*: where the power of the piece, the fresh insight gained into language and phrasal architecture, comes through the (traditional) "defect" in consecutivity, the failure of each sentence to complete in a destination (which is the next sentence). so you're

removing hierarchy, and in doing so you're bringing into question the whole traditional value of hierarchical levels.

so here's the new topography: local within the centre of a margin &/or the margins of a point. as the Sign gets investigated as a primary working and as those investigations get declared, so then the logic of a contradiction finds its place. and what is of the greatest importance in what we're doing: a realigning of discourse in the framework of a larger (logical?) allogicality.

this testing of the boundaries of logic & discourse, the positioning of historically saturated categories in new, problematic areas seems close to much that Nietzsche recommends. i'm thinking especially of his splendid insight into the foundation of truth in metaphor & his deconstructional concept of -- what was it -- "glorious unwisdom"?

I am in
what i am out
of

this is the locus of deconstruction, of witnessing.

so in a broad way -- language comes to challenge the categories it has so long supported (this is the fold, the categorical in-folding of language on itself in the widest sense) & the political analogy, if you want one, wd be imperialism . . . the linguistic analogy of grammar and commonwealth.

further to your notion of witnessing. do you see this at all tying in with a testing or deconstruction of witnessing itself? it seems to me that the very fact of witnessing signs involves the whole logic of contradiction of the sign itself; that in witnessing language we are in fact witnessing absence, postponement, the deferral of presence. hence this kind of tendency to put language into an observable framework, under a seeing-ness rather than a readingness, locates in the huge, almost muscular, reflex of the SIGN as a POSTPONEMENT. i see this also connecting with the notion of desire: that which is deferred is desired, the desire articulating a postponed otherness: alterity.
to suffer.
to desire.

become not subjective affixes but the qualities common to both an anthropology and a semiotics. the confluence in a radicalness of both subjective & objective terms. and this for me is the current fascination: how a work like your *Signs of the Particularities* generates and holds this anthropologicality: the

structural integrity of a desire as well as a deferral. also your opting for a vertical structure (your listing technique) rather than a lateral one, for a pilon rather than a horizon of discourse allows the quality of collected desire(s) to develop.

the quality i'm trying to outline is this: to purge language of a subjectivity can arrive at a more radical subjectivity, or rather a deeper context in which subject/object fuse in a structural matrix.

in the structure of the sign
is the structure of desire.

* * * * *

to live and write with(in) these contradictions will be to find a proper place for a paralogic discourse.

i think it's the topological contradiction that Barry (Watten) finds so hard to accept -- that an outside has to hold (container fashion) an inside seems to be his predication; that the concepts in operation must remain stable and fixist. whereas for me, the whole topology is möbius and it's the deconstructive gesture in our work which produces the twists in surface. simply thinking of reference & the implication of linguistic destination as a thing outside itself (i.e. the entire temporalized teleology of deixis) shows this so clearly: the inner structure, the inner determinants of the sign are its "exteriorities" its "otherness"(es). the sign is what it isn't. what Watten fails to grasp is the possibility (already realized in Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida) of an active praxis under erasure -- the ability to deliberately lodge inside the problematic & deliberately not resolve it. the line through the sign that cancels it, prohibits its "play" and yet allows it still to be present as a legible deletion. this is a deliberate strategy of placement, a location within to be out, to take apart from the inside. matrix and value are not separable units but the möbius turn of a single surface (text), the structural complexities of a homogenous space (text again) -- close to the way Saussure described the signifier-signified relationship as the two sides of a single coin.

i started to see our dyad strongly as just such a möbius structure, with the verbal sign the edge and the intelligibility-unitelligibility relation as the actual surface twist. most dominant is an actual TURN of language from a structural (face) to a value (surface), from intelligible signs to unintelligible ones.

i feel in that work, but really i guess in our respective work in

general, a movement towards the testing of new semiotic topologies: the actual space of inscription, the variant surfaces of the text, the different folds of a single surface which announces the homogenous space as an intense heterogeneity. and from this testing comes the breakdown of the hold of a binary perception (inevitable i guess through our refusal to accept the divisive razor of logicity: the either/or of the in/or/out).

we're close to what Heidegger i think calls "astonishment" -- very close to your sense of witnessing. astonishment (what in other places Heidegger calls "destruction") comprises an attunement (*stimmung*) of confrontables which puts the text outside of inherited text-logics. unlike Husserlian "bracketing," astonishment is profoundly relational & surprisingly close to certain concepts of the *picturesque* in 18th cent. theory (as the picturesque developed in, say, Uvedale Price & William Gilpin as filling in a category lacunaire between the sublime & the beautiful). in astonishment you're held to a thing by actually being apart from it: the spacing is the connexion (cf. Pound & Fenollosa on this one!) and isn't this close to your sense of witnessing: putting language under observation within itself?

(a brief spin off: isn't listing (i.e. the technique of non-horizontal inscription) the ideal structure for a language under observation? by listing here, i don't mean so much an organization of referent values as much as a placing of language in a condition of observation, in a manner by which it can not only be seen (iconic run-on ahead of reading here) but that seeing per se can be seen.)

i've never fully accepted Ron's (Silliman's) theory of the matrix which i feel to be too topologically insufficient. CONTENT, for me, says more of itself in the immediate structural/semiotic play that its inscription immediately institutes. meaning by this that there's a radical opacity in the sign considered as a charged mark which opens up an immediate field of multiple meaning. content for me has been less an internal activity and more a semiotic twisting of the identical sign surface that holds form too. content is neither present nor absent, but more a possibility, a type that is tokened by the gesture of the torque of the möbius. Ron's matrix-content seems yet another structural(ist) myth. i wd replace "matrix" with a term like "sign topology": the nature of the space on and in which language finds itself. "matrix" is too safe a foreclosure and holds the in/out disjunction too safely to allow a real explosion of sign practice.

one thing that strikes me as very exciting in our dyad . . . we're

relocating syntactic operations on the level of the letter & not the word. that interface of your "opacities" with my "intelligibilities" both recontextualizes the opacity and also brings the "word" & the (non)word letter-cluster into deconstructional juxtaposition. so that there's a profound dislocation of both which thereby institutes a whole area of language-possibilities.

there's surely an ontological issue that we could raise here: when is a letter-group a word, is a letter-group a latent word? how are both a part of language? it seems that we've seized on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and pushed its implications further.

you ask me about my use of "intertext"? mostly i use the term to refer to a macrosyntax connecting the text at hand with texts outside itself. the intertext for me is a means of extending syntactic operations so as to include numerous separate zones of signifiers; the operation may be via allusion, reference or (as in collage) by appropriation.

embedded in the dynamic of the intertext is the citational nature of the written word itself. there is an imperative upon a text to constantly change its context, constantly disrupt a place of being. e.g. i write a letter to you = context 1; i mail the letter to you = disruption of context 1, institution of context 2, a state of text without reader; you open the mail and read the letter = context 3; pass it on to a friend = context 4; the friend quotes part of it in a letter to another friend = context 5 etc.

intertextuality is exactly the network of citational relations that any text must set up. collage, of course, is just such a form of citation and the use of found material is an intertextual usage (i read and recognize a phrase "from" Wittgenstein no longer "in" a Wittgenstein text and that creates an intertext). intertextuality is a strategy of disruption, the legitimation of which strategy lies at the essence of the written word's citationality. in a sense then every written phrase is a form of quote and the necessary ability for the written word to move through different contexts renders it essentially contextless and radically disruptive.

appreciate your feedback on my two books. one attempt in both *Dr. Sadhu* and *Ow's Wai* was to localize meaning in the specific word. people have described my writing as surrealist which is totally erroneous -- although, as i think about it there is a connection via technique. for instance the strength of a Magritte can be seen to come from the intelligibility of particulars plus the impossibility of juxtaposing these particulars in any "intelligible" way. which wd be

to say that the technical issue at the core of the surrealist project is an issue of defective (because frustrated) metonymy -- i.e. the inability to *complete* a wholeness. instead there is a forced interface of particulars (& hence a syntax).

i've found that localized meanings in language create similar tensions, most especially however they evade the destination-inevitability of the line. i've tried to conceive line not as the corridor to a destination but rather as the symptom (itself the trace) of autonomous semantic explosions. this i think wd account for the lexical richness & density of meaning(s) that you noticed in the Preface to *Ow's Waif*. this all suggests to me the possibility of deconstructing the line by a recontextualizing & reshaping of its points of reference from within relationships (and hence in contrast to cut up method) -- a way, in fact, of opening up the line by compacting it.

the other thing too i wanted to eliminate in *Dr. Sadhu* was the presence of *taste* as any significantly operative factor in word choice.

"Impermeable writing" ? . . . yes -- & cf. Godel's proof (which the Olsonists never understood or else never appreciated) viz. that every linguistic form is, a priori, an open form owing to the necessary opacity at base of ALL LANGUAGE. projective verse, i feel, got trapped in a phonocentricity that closed off many areas of concern a propos language and text. it showed itself in the conception of linguistic space as pneumatic pause rather than grammatological difference & the misguided emphasis on presence (sign as the figural supplement of breath, breath as intrinsically embedded in the syllable etc.). i think our own work gets closer to this root problem of presence as an outcome of the defective sign, the non-delivering signifier which curves away from a signified back into its own signifiatory ramifications.

on the issue of intentionality, your points are well taken. i gave up on the possibility of absolute nonintentionality a long time ago & can see, in hindsight, that my interest lay more in the possibility of a general disinterestedness in zones of content (hence the random techniques i adopted for generating vocabularies which i would then, at the point of supply, intentionally enter). this way, i think, i was able to relocate intentionality at the margins of a program, a proceduralism.

i guess in the afterword (in *Ow's Waif*) my reference to "a near total suspension of form from content" could be better explained this

way: the chosen procedural method allows me to concentrate, almost exclusively, on the relations & interrelations of signifiers i.e. upon the single face of the linguistic Sign -- & working (as you mention earlier in your letter) from a topos closer to the visual than the verbal arts.

the technique is closer to bricolage than a pure aleatoricity. i'm working there with "stuff at hand" appropriating and setting up new coordinates of hand and eye. important for me in bricolage is the minimization of taste as an active agent in text generation. bricolage establishes a scarcity of materials which in itself realigns & reinstitutes a discourse of value. which is to say the criterion of "goodness" and "worth" becomes less significant than the criterion of a praxis within scarcity.

Steve.

Fairlee, Vermont
27 August 1977

steve,

one thing, wch i pick up from a letter yesterday from Peter Seaton . . . is that in wrtng we set up a condition in wch there are more possibilities than can be kept track of, a kind of overdetermining, wch is another way of saying that the language, & hence the text, comes before the world. "möbius" gets to that, especially when reacting against the undetermined kind of wrtng where you just set up a game & play within the rules. but to take the position that you can set up the rules of the game, wch seems a prerequisite, conscious or not, of wrtng on a single surface (tho already i can see a fuzziness in who i'm saying actually writes like this) is to replay the 19th century's ominiscient narrator -- but we are inside these rules & the wrk is charting the way the rules are constantly cutting in on us. awash in language -- so if we're inside it, then we dont want a poetry wch remakes neat borders, a unifying principle? well, in this sense i can be sympathetic, i can see where you come from to do it, to the notion that any specimens (citations is the wonderful word you use) of language are part of the thing and need no imposed ordering, hence aleatory wrk. i've argued, and continue to, for intention, an ordering not of overall structure, but of moment to moment force of meaning -- stripped of any ordering principle one goes on one's own -- what -- perception is definitely

not the wrd, nor is experience -- "knowhow" is the N. American pioneer way of putting it -- a continually enfolding (infolding) series of possibilities (again you say "OR" is the operative thing in *Signs of the Particularities*) -- but possibilities in a special sense -- the sense of "actualities" wch are numerous -- aspects to each figure of more than numerable number, not just duck & rabbit but inseam & heartlessness & the terror of the line, so actualities in a special sense of ones that dont tell the whole story & possibilities in the special sense of ones that are not "mere."

. . . OR . . . so we never seem to be able to get a hold of things, presence, the myth that really underlies the whole uniplanar approach, is always arnd the corner, but *we* are here, & the language constantly speaks of all possible things. there's got to be some satisfaction in that -- or else we're so out of joint we've no hope for satisfaction. "Bricoleurs": puttering abt in these landscapes, inscapes of the worlds we imagine ourselves to be in, and the worlds we have been told we are in, wondering, as we go about our merry & not so merry ways, but where is the real beyond this veil of habit & systematic misdirection, as if poking under this rock or that will turn it up. & it was always there, only we misunderstood what "there" meant. ("Witnessing and absence!")

one thing i've wanted to hear from you -- i remember spending some time articulating this in a very early letter -- is some account of the necessity of adopting the vocabulary, tho not the substance, of certain aspects of Structuralist thought that seem overeagerly hacking away at projected binary operations, abandoning the little that we actually have got, wch after all is quite immense, a person cld never run out, in pursuit of some fool's gold of an idea of deeper structures wch these things that we live within refer to. in other wrds, if you say a wrd like *cipher* to me, i'm bound to get nasty: as if the trees i'm staring at right now, here in the middle of this field in N. Vermont, arent any more than a mirror reflection, valueless, or simply neutral, in themselves, codes/indices/ciphers that they are. i've made out this critique in a number of places -- *Palukaville, Stray Straws* -- as well as that early letter -- and i'm curious as to yr reaction. this sense that once you get an insight into the fact that language constitutes the world & doesnt describe it then all these words are mere codices -- wch is dandyism for one thing, has a flipness i dont like, tho i can feel welling up here my religious/ethical/ethnic sobriety. you're right to speak of the essentially citational quality of both our wrtng -- wch is the perfect technical description for what I was calling witnessing -- but it is rooted in a sense that what we are citing is also what we are in, wch seems to me what makes it antithetical to the "cipher" idea -- &

here's where intentionality falls into place: because as we witness ourselves, & that is a responsibility that cannot be taken lightly -- intentionality *is* responsibility. (I'm struck here, having just read some of Bruce (Andrews') political "science" wrk how his effort seems to be to unmask the idea that policy is made without intention, & therefore w/o responsibility, particularly his citing of the loose language that analysts & politicians use & take at face value -- "dikes" "hedges" "dominoes" "protection" -- w/o ever looking into the implications of these words, but, even more cynically, bandying all these terms abt to create what PL used to call smoke screens. Bruce seems to be insisting that Governments can be held accountable to be acting intentionally, that in their use of these phrases they aren't so much deluded as deluding -- but the very process of deluding necessarily leads to self delusion. poetry, of course, breaks this circle &, indeed, on that account, can rightly be said to give us a measure of truth.)

with all that sd, there is a way that poetry can be all surface & do that up right, wch has something to do with acknowledging the plane, or investigating the properties of a plane. Silliman is to the point here, as is Michael Palmer & others. "plane" or "field." & these words -- surface, plane, field, can also concentrate the attention wrongly, are very plastic terms to describe writing by, & come on to us because we're so caught up in the visual arts, ie we're bricoleurs. still, i think it's got something to do with wanting to impact numerous readings into a single sentence or poem -- wch began with the simple idea of ambiguities, numerous senses, & is now a full blown . . . ?

"that we don't intrude with that kind of egophallic blindness that borders on a schizophrenic unawareness of the physis" -- wch places the sense that one watches with close attention -- that not to intrude requires the balance -- skating has been the image -- tho it's almost a kind of diving w/o splash so that the surface begins to lose its otherwise "apparent" separateness from the rest of the water. you point to Heidegger as a way to avoid the pitfall of the either/or; i bring up (an object or a subject, inside or outside) in *Stray Straws*: wch is absolutely to my sense: that thrownness wch is unified prior to any separating out of doer & done. to unmake the borders of logic, a glorious "unwisdom," wch puts us back amidst the world. here again, last night, in watching the Chandler/Hawks movie *The Big Sleep*: how the story doesn't really add up, à la film noir, & it is this confusion & murkiness that makes the film so powerful, given that Marlow nonetheless is able to act, & coherently, without "logical certainty." can you see how, pointing out how my *Signs of the Particularities*, in removing hierarchy & showing what you call

the essentially ethical concern for witnessing, for allowing "the noninstrumental" to remain paramount -- you're pointing to precisely the core motivation in what i call, is called, both intentionality & responsibility?

you ask do i see in the notion of witnessing also a testing of it, "a deconstruction of witnessing itself?": yes, of course, because we in effect *fall into* what we are witnessing, we make it up. "presence" itself, i begin to see, as a postponement, wch almost is a necessary perspective to get to where we are, but is no more modern than Proust.

Charles.

52 Claxton Blvd., Toronto, Ont.
11 Sept. 1977

Charles:

you write, i've argued, and continue to argue, for intention. you say "an ordering not of overall structure but of moment by moment force of meaning" but doesnt "moment by moment" involve you in a pretty quotidian sense of linguistic time that completely ignores trace structure? i don't know how you feel about the Derridean revision of our notion of temporality in language but, it seems to me, that when you accept a signifier as being a (sensible) "this" that stands for a (phenomenal) "that" (an acceptance on which all signification must surely be based) then time itself becomes an aspect of spatialization? or rather that language inhabits the dead space between two non-occurring "instants."

what intentionality institutes is a modification of linguistic structure (in the same way that you can treat "parole" as a violation of "langue.") i dig what you're saying about the moment by moment force and i know that for myself, in the past as now, the impulse to demark meaning within the parameters of the single word has been very strong. but i'm coming to see the shortcomings in this approach -- especially the narrow & i believe now, erroneous sense of meaning as some kind of hypostasized "presence" (presence + essence) within the sign (& the sign itself seen as within the moment). meaning, i think, is an environmental condition (an ecosphere) that permits sign function to take place. we don't produce meaning but rather situate our speech acts relationally

within it. meaning is difference & opposition, which is more amorphous than the dialectic, but it does hone in on the significance, the vitalness of the dead space, the absence between terms as the crucial thing.

later on in yr letter you seem to come out against presence as "the myth that really underlies the whole uniplanar approach" but a phrase like "moment to moment" seems complicit with the myth, whereas my own conviction is that inhabiting language we're inhabiting a system founded on a contradictory logic.

re the structuralist issue and your reaction to cipher. i feel you're missing something essential to the status of the referent. to even attempt a differentiation of experience as a tree *in* Vermont involves you in a mode of differentiation that itself depends upon "writing" as its irreducible base. in agreement with Derrida i'd say that language (speech) perception itself are aspects of a general writing (Derrida's terms is arche-écriture), which is the play of trace, difference and postponement involved in any temporal-spatializing of experience.

later on you mention that "what we are citing is also what we are in" & this you see as antithetical to my sense of the cipher. but the very notion of an interiority seems questionable. i mean, we're both in *and* out of language (hence the appeal to the möbius as a perceptual model or analogue) and language constitutes the structures & sets by which "things" show their "thing-ness." so there's a constant play of positivities and negativities, of language wiping itself out to reappear again.

intention as responsibility? yes. but also intentionality realized in language can also be seen as the condition of martyrdom, a kind of giving up of self to allow language structures to pass through and, in passing through, make up our selves. language insists upon an operative notion of the Self as porous. further you write "with all that sd, there is a way that poetry can be all surface & do that up right, wch has something to do w/ acknowledging the plane, or investigating the properties of a plane." to which i would simply add that the concern must be with both a plane & spacing i.e. the situations of language (graphically) & that plays upon/within that site.

you mention bricolage as being "caught up in the visual arts." i see bricolage less as a visual strategy and more as environmental & ecological, tied to a concept of recycling & an economics of scarcity.

i had a strong reaction to your phrase re language as what "one

watches with close attention." it seems to me that our relation to language has to be more complex (and contradictory) than a perception or witnessing (if these latter actions imply a set distantiation between perceiver and perceived). we watch as we use and we're constituted as selves and subjects by language passing through us. and so i applaud when you say towards the end: act without "logical certainty." that's precisely it. & what you describe as a falling into what we are witnessing wch i take as a gestural entry into the dynamics of a deconstructive moment.

Steve.

464 Amsterdam Ave., New York, N.Y. 10024
15 September 1977

steve,

delighted, as always, to get your letter. in yr sharp critique of my last, i think you do sharpen the discussion, wch was just my hope in stating possibilities of disagreement with you. it shouldn't surprise you, then, that i tend to agree with what you say, tho i'm glad my remarks led you to such a delineated explanation. "moment by moment force of meaning" of course is the upcropping of the myth of Presence, wch, for all to say, i obviously can't completely put out of my way of thinking -- but I don't need to be convinced that language calls into question the whole nature of the "out there," wch you either thought was a contradiction in the later part of my letter or an unclarity. i think you understand the necessity of my argument for intention, if i cloak that in the language of presence it is my critical failing, but the force of the meaning is as strong. wch is why i felt the press, the strength, of yr reply: you were reacting to something there. if i mentioned trees i did not mean to sound like a Berkleyan empiricist, nothing cld be further from my sense of things. but then you do not really answer my hesitations, not about the content of yr use of structuralist terms (wch i have no problem with) but the general way those terms are used to devalue -- alright: here i say something like: to devalue the actual thing (wch is not the "object" but that fusion of language & world that we are a part of) for mere play with "symbols." okay: what this "actual thing" is, that's where i went wrong in my expression "moment by moment" you're right on to point that out. but i'm willing to concede that because it's really an aberration in my point -- wch is that the dilletantish (read cynical not playful for this word)

bandying of signs with no regard for the fact that they are the world (ie are value) is what i'm concerned abt: wch i wldnt be if i didnt share your sense of how we are all living within & without language. so you say in an earlier letter "w/o egophallic intrusion" & that speaks to what i'm saying here. then there's all this binary stuff -- when we both know it's "n-chotomies." obviously, most reflective of my thought right now are the comments you quote that you agree with: presence as a kind of postponement, acting w/o certainty, falling into what we are witnessing: wch is, of couse, the method of deconstruction.

i think much of these assumptions ran through my letter, so i am a bit puzzled at yr more sweeping sense that i don't see language in a way that "makes the trees you're staring at linguistically irrelevant & yet in a sense can only be understood through linguistic structures" :: anyway, it's a rare joy in a letter to be told "you misunderstand the whole status of the referent": of course, what i'm getting at is just that status, that to say "referent" almost doesnt get to it because it misses the weight of the world that hangs in there (where). no place, no time -- "two non-occurring moments" -- yes -- but the thing you realize is there's no additional loss, if anything the superfluous loss -- always the cruellest -- evaporates & one is left to go on in an altogether more sane way -- what does Thoreau say -- "beside myself in a sane way," or David Cooper pointing out how paranoia, being next to one's mind, is better than being eknoid, out of it -- the "normal" condition of the socialized citizen -- tho best to bale to be next to, in & out of with some freedom of movement. or Kafka: you can hold yrself back from the suffering of the world, but it is just this suffering resulting from this, that is the one suffering you can avoid. but of course that kind of holding back is what i'm trying to get out, however incommunicably, when i was calling into question the use of the term "cipher": ie manipulation of signs as if they were distinct from the world, operations on 'it' where 'on' is an actual space gap, wch is the space of that holding back.

But maybe this is the wrong tack, maybe i am just talking abt quality, depth, things like that. Another way to think abt it comes up in talking to Mike Gibbs the other night. Says Gibbs -- I am more interested in the "how" of writing -- ie formal innovation, operations on language, experimentation, than the "what," specifically the dribble of personal narration that populates the American literary landscape. To wch he concedes, on questioning from me, that the "how" does, of course, collapse into a "what." Now I propose that this obsession with new experimental forms -- avant gardism in the worst sense of that word -- is actually no more

intrinsically interesting than its counterpart of obsession with personal narrative, tho perhaps formal innovation catches the eye more just because we (I anyway, in N.Y.) are overexposed to the other & it's a welcome relief & also an opening of the field. But there does seem something cynical, or anyway superficial, abt this idea that poetry is just the manipulation of ciphers -- operations, systems -- and meaning seems to fall by the wayside. It is wrong of me to say "moment by moment force of meaning" or "felt meaning" for what I mean here -- wch is really that Heideggerian understanding of the fusion of what and how in the actual language we live in, wch forms *us* & wch we, in our active participation in the making of social reality, actively reform (or in our passive stupefaction in the face of social reality) "actively" consume as commodity -- eat up reality & produce only useless waste product -- COCA COLA bottles, wch can be cynically exhibited (recycled) into "art" as Sign of Society/ "our" civilization, spewed up undigested, (not redigested). An aesthetic based primarily on experimentalism: Look! see the way they can be changed around & around! that is content to stop at what is, at most, an initial stop at distancing us from them by camp, fashion, decoration, stylishness (modishness) -- this is just a continuation of all the mistakes of dadaism & surrealism. The new, the new, the new. But poetry does not break out of all boundaries: we are limited to language, tho not by it. It is within these bounds, limits, finitudes, particulars, that limitlessness is to be found: all the rest is a mindless *épaté la bourgeoisie* that is more like bourgeois trendiness than creating a new world/word. So I think it's not that I dont understand the status of the referent, it's that I see that status in constant jeopardy of commoditization -- even by the very people who profess to profess its status (there are nowadays many professors of language, but it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live??). So often, I feel, in pop structuralism everything is reduced to *mere* signs, wch are cast as disguises for what is really happening underneath, at some depth level (binarily derived) -- wch is just the distancing from the world I am talking about (holding yrself back from the world: the one suffering you might avoid): so when I sd the "trees" I was looking at being undervalued by this; I didnt mean the "external reality" of trees, I meant the everpresent reality (& postponement) that is the world & the language that we see it through. That we, in our very selves, are part of & ever so far beyond or behind. So I didnt mean to use "tree" in the sense of A.J. Ayer shaking his hands & saying well, *these* are real, I cld have as well said the "of" in front of me, or the "azOot": things in themselves, for themselves, not mere schema!

. . . I can see how my concern over "cipher" & "moment by moment

force of meaning" really can be read as a distortion of what I was actually trying to get at. My bêtes noirs, then, would be theatricalization -- the making of various insights into the nature of language & sign into an ideational image, of wch surrealism is the most blatant example from the past &, lately, conceptual art (where a work is not realized or even "realized" as an absence but is pointed to: wch is the referential fetish); & pictorial transparency, as if words were mere instrumentalities or really the conceding of the struggle to own our world but letting the language slip into the out there.

more soon,

Charles.

24 November 1977

steve,

the Ronald Johnson article (ed. note: "Synchronicity, Ronald Johnson and the Migratory Phrase" by Steve McCaffery, pp.112-115, *vozt* Vol. 3 No.3 Baltimore, Md. 1976) basically, a fine description of bricolage, wch obviously is a key term for you & one that fits my sense of what's up at least in my own poetic working. the fact that as poets we are working with an already existent system, wch defines, delimits, a (the) universe, so really we are giving different views of it (ie language), the material at hand, to be "viewed." "is shared": wch seems to me increasingly a message encoded in the language, a scent, "is us": wch is the place where emotion, say, can "authentically" be "present." this is something i've been giving a lot of thought to -- how to describe (as if that were necessary) the way emotion can enter into the writing, how it's in the language, & how it can be abused. "personism" in so far as it's extended as a picaresque form has seemed to have a monopoly on emotion, at least in the poetry that seems interesting to read; it somehow located the "emotion" somewhere between the writer and the reader, so it became a telling . . . let me go at this again: the picaresque, using language instrumentally to tell"about" this telling actually is unable to have the power of finding the emotion in the actual language & how it breaks across the page, you dont need to stage the telling but understand that the telling is already present in the material -- that picaresque staging, that telling, is exactly the "egophallic"/"schizophallic" intrusion we've been talking abt in these

letters -- instead one stands back & watches ("citational") that telling wch is constantly happening (& constantly an absence as well . . .).

Charles.

320 - 10th. St. N.W., Calgary, Alta.
10 December 1977

Dear Charles:

loved your insight into emotional presence in language. you should check out a letter i sent bruce (andrews) some time ago that gave my comments on his great work *Vowels*. i talked there about this very thing, the de and re-contextualizing of emotion and the notion i think we both share about the authoric presence as a witnessing. your dead on about the picaresque monopoly on emotion. i think too the whole ontology of emotion and its context is determined by outmoded semiotic circuits, especially the classic transmissional structure of discourse which situates an active transmitter against a passive receptor, which all seems to be tied up with the entirety of picaresque gravity: as if emotion is transmitted and received along a fixed pole between active and passive terminals. . . also the need to dislocate emotion and treat it as an element within the realm of bricolage (perhaps what i'm trying to get at here is the notion of a recycling of emotion beyond and through the stated integrity of a subject). the emotion within the language you refer to (emotion as an ultrasubjective linguistic feature) is surely correct and valid. when we consider how language is acquired too, i mean, the ontology of the speech act itself and the child's first performances constitute a highly emotional interface with the social code. that, to me, is the central activity: the meeting of a personal intentionality towards message against the sociolectality of the code. emotion seems to me so strongly tied to the whole notion of reference and insufficiency tested within systems and objects of self-reference or at least diminished referentiality.

Steve.

THE TORONTO RESEARCH GROUP REPORTS:
A MYTH OF TEXTUALITY

The "reports" on literary theory produced by the Toronto Research Group (TRG), which is to say by bpNichol and Steve McCaffery, and published in *Open Letter* beginning in 1973, have not received much attention from Canadian critics.¹ This neglect is understandable since the reports are idiosyncratic rather than scholarly, self-consciously subjective rather than supposedly objective; but unfortunate, since they confront many of the issues being confronted by critics who are interested in what has become known as postmodernism. Nichol and McCaffery have, of course, written much apart from these reports, but this only makes these reports, in effect their manifestos, all the more (potentially) useful for understanding their work and their influence on other writers.

At the risk of seeming to disregard the discontinuous nature of discourse so apparent in these reports ("this first report is fragmentary"),² I wish to do precisely that which might at first seem to be the most obvious *faux pas*. I wish to discover in (or create out of) these reports a coherent aesthetic theory, that is, a "myth of textuality." However, such an intention may not be the contradiction it at first appears to be. For "myth," as used in this paper, is not meant to signify a story of archetypal character and action, a usage popularized as a basis for literary criticism by Northrop Frye; rather it is used with the signification promoted by Roland Barthes, who saw myth as a necessary deception. A myth deceives because it attempts to present culture as nature; it is necessary because it provides a welcome sense of order in the face of chaos. And since, in Barthes's conceptualization of myth, order can only be provisional, it is necessary not only to create myths but also to destroy them. Each new deception must, in its turn, be demystified, an action which inevitably ends in the creation of a new deception. Thus Jonathan Culler, a critic well versed in the theory of deconstruction, writes that "Barthes's most incisive and productive work combats the mystification which translates culture into nature"; and then adds, almost as an afterthought, that "in considering his later works we shall have to ask whether this is not a mystification of the same genre."³ The work that shatters a myth

creates, in doing so, its own myth. Thus one of my purposes here is to construct a (necessary) myth that invites demystification.

* * *

The TRG reports generate a myth of textuality through a consideration of "translation" and "narrative." Translation is conceived of as not just the shift from one language to another but also as the shift from one language act to another within the same language (i.e., a homolinguistic translation). Much as in George Steiner's *After Babel*, each and every utterance is seen as a translation since each and every utterance is an attempt to interpret or re-interpret that which has, in one way or another, already been perceived. Translation is, more properly speaking (in the TRG context), a "transcreation" (TRG 10), where the act of perception is acted upon, that is, becomes the cause for an act of creation (not *re*-creation since repetition is held, in the Heraclitian sense, to be impossible). Any translation, then, is the creation of a text (TRG 1: 81) just as a narrative is the creation of a text, the difference being that a translation has as its point of departure (i.e., source of perception) a specific other text. "The translative act is an act of words upon words" (TRG 1: 81). Thus both the study of translation and the study of narrative become the study of text as activity rather than text as artefact, or, to use Barthes's term, as do the TRG (TRG 7: 55), the reports become a study of the art of *écriture*.

The concern, first with translation and later with narrative, becomes a concern with the location of determinacy; the main thrust of the reports being initially to take it away from the text, or object, and invest it in the reader/writer, or subject. And similar to the formulation of the expressionist aesthetic, it is the subject's capacity to transmit or perceive emotion (where the structure of a text is considered to be the material manifestation of an emotional energy pattern) that is important. The expressionist aesthetic, however, posits a universality of emotion which the reader/writer must attempt to gain access to via the text. The TRG soon become uncomfortable with this universality and the unavoidable implication that determinacy may indeed reside in the text--albeit, with an emotional rather than rational use of language.⁴

The TRG reports do begin, though, as if they were pursuing the universal, for if a text is to have any social value at all, it must represent something that can be shared. Thus, translation is conceived of in the Coleridgean sense of "transcreation" where a "root" quality exists to be translated or shared (TRG 10: 34). The text created consequent to the perception of a text must somehow remain faithful to this "root" quality. But since, for the TRG, a

"transcreation" is the result of a "reading into" a text and not of a "reading out,"⁵ it is the individual reader/writer alone who *determines* whether or not a text has remained faithful to the "root." The act of reading becomes an act of interpretation where "any path creates valid reader experiences" and "there can be no absolute interpretation" (TRG 11: 67), only a sort of Poundian "seeing." The text itself is only an energy pattern whose *perceived* structure is a configuration of discharges (TRG 1: 64) which are intended to represent abstractly and not verisimilitudinally the "root" energy pattern (TRG 10: 52). The "root" then is not constant but indeterminate and multiple. Thus the borrowing of the term "root" from Coleridge is potentially misleading since the TRG force it to undergo a shift from an external (and therefore potentially objective or determinate) quality to an internally perceived (and therefore inherently subjective and indeterminate) quality. The transcreation of this internally perceived "root" becomes a contingent "energy event" (TRG 5: 5) where "what we get is a writing of you seeing" (TRG 10: 43): an "event" which is the subjective *expression* of emotions. For the moment, then, the text is a very indefinite thing apparently useful only insofar as it can transmit an energy pattern of emotion from one person to another; but this transmission is problematical since the perception and expression of the "root" are "events" in a Derridian world of freeplay.

The emphasis on the subject does not, however, stop the TRG from using the word "rational." Rationality becomes a subjective act of pattern creation. As with Coleridge's term "root," it shifts as a concept from the outside to the inside, from object to subject. Thus, by the eleventh report, "geomancy" (see note 4) becomes "rational geomancy" where "we mean by Rational Geomancy the acceptance of a multiplicity of means and ways to reorganize the energy patterns we perceive in literature" (TRG 11: 64). It is rational because it is faithful to the energy patterns (perceived) and not because it is faithful (and answerable) to the codes and conventions (adhered to or subverted) thought to be embedded in a text. The codes and conventions (of literature, of society) are not ignored; they are simply subsumed in the subjective response which has license to call upon a limitless "multiplicity of means and ways." The search for determinacy in the text (in *écriture*) therefore leads inexorably to the opposite conclusion: that it is predominantly indeterminate.

The argument continues: traditionally form and content (for content read "perceived root") are presented as a dichotomy; a series of rules (codes and conventions) are then proposed which purport to define the play between the two, and thus our ability to derive conventionalized meaning. But the TRG does not separate form and content; they present them as two aspects of the same

activity. The conceptualization of form/content as a dichotomy is seen as symptomatic of an invalid way of seeing the world. These reports therefore claim to confront the belief that "if we control the inner world of the novel then by extension we control the outer world of biological emotional interaction. Word order is world order"; (TRG 5: 88). The traditional narrative in book form is seen as a fossil. And just as the "study of morphemic evolution (the diachronic into the synchronic) is the study of fossilization" (TRG 4: 44) where "the fossil [claims to be] a three-dimensional, universally perceptible memory" (TRG 4: 47), so too "the bound book [in its attempt to create 'universally-perceptible memory' or word order--the 'root' as externally available] . . . freezes the word order for all time" (TRG 5: 87). But all that is frozen is the word order and not the world order for "what is dead is not the novel . . . but an old way of seeing which is still being clung to" (TRG 6: 76). The material fixity of the text has been mistakenly equated with a corresponding fixity of content, of meaning.

When determinacy lies with the perceiver even a fixed syntactic order becomes mutable. This new myth demystifies the old myth where there is a "culturally pressured and false 'permanence' of type" (TRG 5: 86). The material fixity of the text is not thereby denied; it simply becomes less important. No longer the dominant partner in a form/content dichotomy, it becomes just another character in the "event"--or perhaps just a box full of spare parts waiting to be assembled and animated. The problem is put enigmatically at the beginning of the third report:

the nature of the reality of writing on two pages
transcends the nature of the reality of writing on them.
(TRG 3: 104-105)

The TRG also draws support here from Gertrude Stein's theory of repetition as insistence. "There is no such thing as repetition (duplication) only insistence and change as the action of insistence marks a change" (TRG 9: 67). There can be no reassertion of a "permanence." The interpretation of the psycho/semantic energy can never be the same. Thus insistence is seen "as an emotionally altered repeat" (TRG 9: 66), and the "root" quality of a text (i.e., of an event) is mutable and subjective.

Further, a fixed text does not necessarily mean a fixed syntax. Non-linear spatial syntax (see note 4), for example, is a syntax which presents the reader with sequences which are only potential. Spatial syntax is not seen as a radical shift away from linear syntax but simply as an extension of it where "writing a sentence is moving in a given space and time" (TRG 2: 10). The writer, of course, must make his choices, but he may do so either in

an effort to inhibit meaning or to provide for an expansive play of meaning, that is, for extensive reader participation in the text. "With spatial syntax the order of the reading becomes NOT the final stage in the writer's writing but the first stage in the reader's reading" (TRG 6: 84). Structure is only inhibiting (read: determinate) if you accept its authority.

To accept the world perception represented by a book as machine, that is, to accept the limits to vision imposed by a structure (and the ideology which must anchor the codes and conventions which describe the limits of a structure's meaning) to the point of seeing the machine as natural, is to turn the book into a commodity (TRG 3: 114). For "there is a point a which . . . an insistence on the physical properties of the *book* becomes an obstacle to entry into the fiction" (TRG 5: 77). In Barthes's terms, the cultural myth becomes so entrenched, so unquestioningly believed in, that readers are no longer able or willing to recognize it as a fiction, as a necessary deception. The book becomes a commodity because it is no longer recognized as an activity; there is no longer "a tension between the reading experience as content and the reading experience as operator" (TRG 5: 82). Experimental texts, texts which relentlessly challenge structural norms, force the reading (and writing) experience to remain self-conscious, and force the reader (and writer) to remain aware that the "reading experience itself is a fiction" (TRG 5: 82).

Thus the ability of the text to determine meaning is not, in the end, denied; such "determined" (by convention) meanings are simply placed in perspective by the self-conscious reflection upon, and in the case of writing, playing with, the limitations of the conventions. This self-consciousness is perhaps the one recognizable commonplace of what is now loosely termed post-modernism, a period of literature which has at its service more useful terms such as "neo-narrative" and "meta-fiction."

* * *

Let us begin again. Having now reached the point where the TRG seems to have gotten away from the quest for universality, let me demonstrate how, at the same time, they have tried to find it in a different place. The TRG realized that this concept of a text which is impermanent, self-conscious, susceptible to infinite transcreation, and composed of arbitrary signs insistently placed, can be, since it squarely confronts the problematic of language, very disturbing. The rejection of traditional structures and the promotion of structures capable of continual change produces a sense of insecurity and a consequent search for security. Renato Poggioli demonstrates in his book on the avant-garde that the

shattering of old structural conventions invariably leads to the search for a new set of structural conventions which will achieve the same purpose. The old order is rejected because it is seen as impure; but the search for a new order is little more than the search for a new sense of purity.⁶ The TRG in their reports confirm this predilection. Their search for purity and universality is the search for what they call non-narrative prose. As they put it: "It's like the holy grail . . . it's our equivalent of the classic quest" (TRG 9: 73).

The reports begin by admitting that "without language [and its ability to determine meaning] there can be no human community yet with it we have the greatest obstacle to its formation" and that therefore "our search for other modes of [text] took as a central concern the elimination or limiting of this problem" (TRG 1: 82-3). The search for non-narrative prose then is the search for a way to transcend the limits of language. This change must be truly radical for "true revolution must involve a deconstruction of the power structure, not merely an exchange of power between groups" (TRG 8: 40). In other words, as with the text as translation, it is insufficient simply to exchange one lexicon for another or one concept of aesthetic purity for another. Since narrative is "language in movement" (TRG 7: 57) and since "time is the only necessary narrative structure" (TRG 2: 5), then to arrive at non-narrative prose, to deconstruct the existing power structure, is to remove time from narrative structure. Thus narrative is seen as sequential and non-narrative an non-sequential (TRG 6: 84). This neutral writing the TRG is aiming for, this narrative of middle voice (i.e., neither active nor passive [TRG 10: 48]) is similar to Roland Barthes's concept of zero degree writing, for Barthes also insists that such a mode of writing can only exist once all indications of time and sequence, of predication, are eliminated.⁷ As Roland Barthes realized, however, once something is materially fixed this is impossible; time enters unbidden.

Le désir, then, is clearly stated, but can it be matched by *un pouvoir et un savoir*? The TRG asks this of itself:

the question then becomes how would non-narrative writing function. Its model is not speech. It is closer to pure *object* or *play* where the importance for the reader becomes what can be gained from meditating upon non-narrative writing in a non-directed way. (TRG 6: 86)

Whereas "traditional fiction assumes a transparency of language" (TRG 5: 77) which attempts to deny its fictionality by claiming representational authority (i.e., myth=nature), thereby providing an obstacle to its fiction, in non-narrative prose (i.e., non-sequential,

self-conscious prose) "the page/book [is placed] back in nature so that its place there can be understood" (TRG 6: 77). "The text is understood as a real object in the real world" (TRG 1: 81). The text no longer pretends to represent nature, to present a "word order" as a "world order"; instead, by representing only itself, the TRG claim that it takes its rightful place as a material entity within nature. However, this text as object is only non-narrative when it is inactive. Once a reader or writer actively participates with a text, once the choices are actual and not just potential, it becomes a narrative in time. The non-narrative text, then, is the text of all potential narratives, which becomes a narrative when the reader engages it (TRG 6: 85). Both reader and writer, because self-reflecting, will recognize that the text is a repository for an infinite number of narratives and will therefore recognize the non-narrative element of any text from which they are in the process of selecting out a narrative sequence. For "choice is arbitrary . . . nothing's hierarchically defined . . . one will do just as well as the other" (TRG 5: 84).

It is important to bring the concept of arbitrariness back into the foreground at this point. For while both the text-and- reader and the text-and-writer can, in effect, merge--"at this point i [the text] am you there is no distinction between us [reader or writer]" (TRG 2: 18)--the "writer and reader can never occupy the same place at the same time" (TRG 6: 85).⁸ Each perceived narrative, because one of a potentially infinite number, must be considered arbitrary in the sense that the myth as necessary deception is both internally complex and externally arbitrary. If the reader's and the writer's perceptions are joined via the text, then there is closure for "order and proportion are . . . techniques of closure and denial" (TRG 8: 45). To accept closure is to accept the universality of that closed foregrounded narrative and to deny the non-narrative background of any foregrounded narrative sequence.

Closure, universality and purity must all be considered synonymous here, for in order for the ends to meet (the reader and the writer) via the text, the text must have determined that meeting. If one person can close the circle, then any person (properly trained) can close it and the meaning becomes universal; and the expression of that meaning or emotion--because capable of eliciting closure--must be a pure expression. But as Barthes says, this is impossible once a text enters the dimension of time--a dimension where all conventions become problematic.

When the ends do not meet (the reader and writer) the centre becomes illusory. "The point now is a shift away from . . . centrality . . . to a new emphasis on transition" (TRG 6: 75). As with Derrida,⁹ the centre is seen as the binding force of an *épistème*, a system or pattern of knowledge and of order. When the

epistème (and in fact the very possibility of the existence of an *epistème*) loses its centre, it is deconstructed. What was once the centre is then seen as a presence (i.e., existent) only by virtue of its simultaneous absence. Thus the TRG write that "behind every written text there is a non-presence, a testifying absence that admits the human inability to hold speech as a permanent flow" (TRG 8: 51). However, by returning to Stein's concept of insistence, they discover a new type of centre: the durational centre (a function of Stein's continuous present). "What is underlined is that there is no such thing as 'realistic' writing—eventually any writing . . . begins to circle around itself" (TRG 7: 45). In Derridian terms, the physical presence of language gains meaning through a continual process of supplementarity (in both senses of the word: to replace what has come before and to add to what has come before). There is no absolute meaning or myth or narrative, only meanings and myths and narratives which keep circling around themselves and expanding, that is, supplementing themselves. When a reader or a writer actively participates in a text he joins this circling and supplementing activity. Thus "the durational centre is always relative, always moving in accordance with the particular reading [or writing] experience" (TRG 5: 89).

The purity sought after and given the name of non-narrative prose then becomes, not the "holy grail" type of absolute and realizable purity, but rather an all inclusive purity of default which claims the title by asserting the impossibility of a knowable purity. It is the purity of the continuous present which is *only* a potential for purity *only* because it subscribes to no false formula of purity (myth or fossil). It would be more correct to say, not that it is pure, but that it is not impure. And so in the end the TRG stop searching for an active non-narrative prose and accepts it as an inactive textuality. The narrative act which acknowledges the non-narrative presence is termed "metanarration" (TRG 9: 73), which carries within it the suggestion that narrative is a provisional textual act (i.e., determinancy is shared by the reader/writer and the text, but only when the text is activated, and then it is only a provisional determinancy) relative to all other potential textual acts.

This concept of text is conceived of in relationship to "index" and "context." For although it is accepted that "we inherit a linguistic framework which, to a large extent, determines the type of reality we will perceive" (TRG 1: 79) and that traditional "writings are hopelessly trapped within the parameters of a fixed metaphysics that language itself sets up" (TRG 4: 47), it is also realized that because of the arbitrariness and the relativity of meaning, "meaning . . . will undergo built in obsolescence" (TRG 4: 47). However, "freed from the necessity of being tied to a

particular signified that can be pointed to (indexed) the words take on their greater meaning which is durational" (TRG 7: 57). Index is time bound and closed; context is durational. The traditional aesthetic which holds that word order can represent world order is an aesthetics of index. "Indexing constitutes a separation of past from present providing access into the past but failing to accumulate the past into the present reading" (TRG 7: 54). The aesthetics of Stein's duration, of context, holds instead that the past "is not chronologically distant . . . but an unacknowledged present we are living thru" (TRG 6: 73). The reader who depends upon index rather than context will find that he runs "up against his own conditioned responses" for "actual gaps in memory trace every assumption that the reader makes" and "every assumption that the reader makes narrows the range of his vision" (TRG 5: 92). The reader who is conditioned to respond in terms of index, and who will therefore be unable to gain access to avant-garde texts, will not realize that "there is a fallacy in all of the talk about the death of language or of the novel, a fallacy that arises because of the unacknowledged present that we have lived through" (TRG 6: 74-75). For the TRG's sense of context is also Stein's sense of the continuous present; it is Eliot's sense of tradition in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*; and it is Julia Kristeva's intertextual field of activity. The TRG quote George Steiner who puts it well:

Today, it is the 'field', the 'manifold', the 'vibratory amplitude' of phenomena that are being stressed. The contours of vision of classic and even of Einsteinian physics, however abstruse and mathematically 'imaginary', were hard-edged. Today, our sense of dynamic processes is beginning to focus on the unstable shell, on the membrane whose functions now appear to be as much a matter of permeability, active transmission, and metamorphoses as they are of separation and distinct identity. In part, the new module arises from the well-known adjustments in the statistical and predictive criteria of partial physics that are called the 'principle of uncertainty' or 'indeterminacy'. The 'centre' cannot--is not meant--to hold'. (TRG 6: 72)

The concept of the intertextual field of activity allows the foreground and the background to exist simultaneously as contrasted elements of the same durational activity. The text, or foreground is the unstable shell, the background is the manifold, the field in which the text finds itself and asserts itself. The text can still be seen as the "axis along which reading and writing exist"

(TRG 7: 55). And since the borders of texts, and therefore of meaning, are permeable, "the reading experience is never an isolated reading of an equally isolated text, for at every point the present reading refers to other texts" (TRG 7: 52). The foreground is the ephemeral emphasis of a certain aspect of the background. The stress is placed "on 'reading reading' [which] creates a self-consciousness in the reader . . . [and] the emphasis becomes placed on the *reading process* . . . [on] fiction" (TRG 5: 77).

The foreground and the background of the intertextual field or context are eventually given new names by the TRG. The foreground becomes "microsyntax" and the background becomes "macrosyntax." The immediacy of the fact of foregrounding is stressed by the assertion that microsyntax is concerned only with units of a sentence or smaller. Anything which the memory adds to this immediate experience belongs to the macrosyntax (TRG 11: 64). It is not simply a case of placing one book in the context of all other books--this would lead to indexing--but of placing the immediate reading experience in the context of a cumulative reading experience. (It goes almost without saying that in accordance with this theory no two cumulative reading experiences can be the same, nor can there be an authoritative cumulative experience.) Thus, "as a macrosyntactic unit all literature is seen as one huge spherical sentence, continually expanding, whose grammar is continuously permuted and modified" (TRG 11: 66).

Narrative, in the end, is the decision to foreground where "reading becomes operationally identical to writing: both being foreground activities." The text, because part of the background, is non-narrative since it "remains on the axis of the possible" (TRG 11: 66). The narrative or metanarration or foreground is a meaningful sequence and the non-narrative text or background is a meaningless (since unactivated) sequence (TRG 7: 47-8). The meaningful foreground becomes meaningful by an act of will and is therefore both a provisionally proposed meaning and a comment (because self-conscious) upon the possibility and the potential extent of such a meaning. Foregrounding is a *meta* activity and thus properly called metanarration. To use a term that has now become common, a narrative which is a metanarration is so because it at once constructs itself and makes available its *deconstruction*. The TRG therefore write that

for Stein the stream of consciousness is a consciousness of consciousness itself. This inevitably leads to metalanguage . . . should we look at the ramifications of this we should see how the possibility of metalanguage opens up the disintegrative possibilities of language itself--for . . . we must admit that language can be so

disassembled; (TRG 6: 75)

and,

metalinguage leads inevitably to the discard/destruction of the frame because it is a descent into the single iconic unit where frame, as boundary (self-container) is no longer necessary. (TRG 7: 52)

This supports the assertion that "the avant-garde is not the push towards chaos or oblivion it is so often seen as but rather the instinctive drive towards the reassertion of context" (TRG 7: 52). And "when we reveal the process and context, we are forced to recognize that the single isolated person/text is ALWAYS lacunaire" (TRG 7: 54).

Thus the myth of textuality traceable in the TRG reports (where traceable implies a limit to vision) is a myth that continues simultaneously to seek out and shy away from universality and the ability of the writer/text/reader nexus to actively determine and therefore share in this universality. The results are provisional and self-conscious both in nature and in kind. It is a myth that would deny its own "fossilness" by being a meta-myth with a durational centre. And yet it is a myth which has delimited itself by relentlessly pursuing a purity it has had to deny itself.

The myth leads naturally into the twelfth publication of the Toronto Research Group, the edition of *Open Letter* which they edited and entitled *Canadian Pataphysics*. Pataphysics, a word coined by the French writer Alfred Jarry,¹⁰ is the science of the exception, that is, of otherwise unaccounted for lacunae. This collection of essays is anything but serious—but then seriousness would be anathema to pataphysics (the only serious event being the forever mirrored and re-mirrored unseriousness). The Toronto Research Group leaves us in an expanding world of isolated but insistent textual events, such that characteristically the most often repeated (insisted upon) phrase in these reports is Gertrude Stein's "narrative is telling anything to anyone at anytime."

NOTES

1. In all, the TRG published eleven reports between the spring of 1973 and the fall of 1978; in the winter of 1980/81 they edited a collection of essays entitled *Canadian Pataphysics*. All of these publications appeared in the Canadian journal *Open Letter* (see Appendix A). bpNichol and Steve McCaffery were the nucleus of

the group.

2. "TRG REPORT 1: -- TRANSLATION," *Open Letter*, Ser. 2, No. 4 (Spring 1973), p. 78. All subsequent citations from the reports are noted in the text only and use the format: report number (i.e., the number given according to date of appearance in Appendix A), colon, and page number.

3. Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1983), p. 45.

4. In the TRG correlation of concepts the emphasis on indeterminate emotions rather than ideas (and their rational representation) translates into an emphasis on sound rather than on sense (TRG 1: 91). Since the problematic of meaning so undermines the referential basis of language, reference is denied authority and becomes just another element in the contingencies of freeplay. Thus, in any translation, it is sound that must be emphasized. They call this type of translation geomantic translation. "Geomantic translation [is an] activity in which the central act is that of the re-alignment of space, of the balance between already existing phenomena" (TRG 1: 84). This balance is attained through the appropriate placement of sound fragments (i.e., the energy particles which constitute an energy event) in relation to an axis (i.e., the perceived "root"). Thus syntax is seen as spatial rather than linear. But since linear syntax can also accommodate sound play "it seems . . . that the issue is not whether a form is 'traditional' or 'avant-garde' but whether or not it carries the highest energy charge the greatest distance" (TRG 9: 62), where the level of the energy charge can be gauged by the degree of faithfulness with which a structure acknowledges its axis. This comes close to the New Critical search for internal textual unity except that, once again, the balance or unity is only perceived and not determined by the text itself. In spite of the element of freeplay, the impulse to order has not disappeared; it has simply become an internalized event rather than being invested in an external object.

5. The term "reading out" is used prominently by Wolfgang Iser in his study of the reading process, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

6. See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans., Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), esp. pp. 199-206.

7. See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans., Annett Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), pp. 29-40.

8. This is contradicted in Report 5 where, discussing Steve Katz' *Peter Prinz*, they write: "Katz is eliminating the book as an unnecessary middleman between the reader's and the writer's consciousness" (TRG 5: 86). Such contradictions are not uncommon in these reports. I do not emphasize them because I feel that at this early stage in the discussion of these reports, it is more worthwhile to discover a myth, which means to discover, or create, a sense of coherence. At a later date it will be useful to consider why such contradictions are allowed to stand.

9. See especially, Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, eds., Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970). For a good discussion of Derrida's work and a useful bibliography, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

10. See, Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1980), p. 32.

APPENDIX A

1. "TRG REPORT 1: -- TRANSLATION," *Open Letter*, Ser. 2, No. 4 (Spring 1973), pp. 75-93.
2. "TRG REPORT 2: Narrative (part 1)," *Open Letter*, Ser. 2, No. 5 (Summer 1973), pp. 3-29.
3. "TRG REPORT 2: Narrative (part 2)," *Open Letter*, Ser. 2, No. 6 (Fall 1976), pp. 104-120.
4. "TRG REPORT 2: Narrative (part 3)," *Open Letter*, Ser. 2, No. 7 (Spring 1974), pp. 40-48.
5. "TRG REPORT 2: Narrative (part 4) TRG RESEARCH REPORT 2: NARRATIVE PART 1 -- THE BOOK AS MACHINE (II)," *Open Letter*, Ser. 2, No. 8 (Summer 1974), pp. 74-93.
6. "TRG REPORT 2: Narrative (part 5) TRG RESEARCH REPORT 2: NARRATIVE PART 2 -- THE SEARCH FOR NON-NARRATIVE PROSE," *Open Letter*, Ser. 2, No. 9 (fall, 1974), pp. 70-87.
7. "TRG REPORT 2 (Narrative, part 5) The Search for Non-narrative Prose, Part 2," *Open Letter*, Ser. 3, No. 2 (Fall 1975), pp. 39-58.
8. "A TRG MISCELLANY," *Open Letter*, Ser. 3, No. 3 (Fall 1975), pp. 34-56.
9. "TRG RESEARCH REPORT 2: Narrative Interlude: Heavy Company (the story so far)," *Open Letter*, Ser. 3, No. 4 (Spring 1976), pp. 61-74.
10. "A Conversation with Fred Wah TRG Report One: Translation (Part 3)," *Open Letter*, Ser. 3, No. 9 (Fall 1978), pp. 34-52.
11. "TRG RESEARCH REPORT TWO: Narrative (part 3) -- RATIONAL GEOMANCY: A Realignment of Kinships," *Open Letter*, Ser. 3, No. 9 (Fall 1978), pp. 64-67.
12. "Introduction," to *Canadian Pataphysics*, ed. The Toronto Research Group, *Open Letter*, Ser. 4, Nos. 6 & 7 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 7-8.

CHRISTOPHER DEWDNEY'S NATURAL HISTORY

PREDATORS OF THE ADORATION

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983

by Christopher Dewdney

Much of what is unique to Christopher Dewdney's poetry in *Predators of the Adoration* (a Selected Poems, 1972-82), comes from his particular use of the languages of science. The geological prehistory of Southwestern Ontario, as it has been preserved in the fossils trapped within the limestone deposits of this area, is central to his work. In the five books represented in *Predators*,¹ Dewdney also draws upon the life sciences, and occasionally, physics and mathematics. "Parasite Maintenance," a major prose piece in which he discusses the process of poetic creativity, is based on current studies in neurology. Further, *Predators* is saturated with technological terms: there is a section on "Remote Control," for instance, or single poems with titles like "Radio Symmetry," "Control Data," or "Surface Error." "Authentic" references to the sciences blend into science-fiction and its high-tech glamour: "A mist of space-stations & rockets / in perfect stiletto halo around complete the moon."²

In the midst of this amorphous, futuristic linguistic environment, which includes everything from palaeozoic scenes to the post-holocaust landscapes of the future, there is a small anomaly. Two of the books of *Predators*, *Spring Trances in the Control Emerald Night* and *The Cenozoic Asylum* are subtitled respectively, books one and two of *A Natural History of Southwestern Ontario*. In the context of the contemporary sciences Dewdney refers to, natural history is an "extinct" discipline. It is possible, of course, to take Dewdney's natural history most simply as a poetics of southwestern Ontario--a "history" of the plants, animals, places and even the weather of this

region, as the "Bibliography of Creatures" in *Spring Trances* suggests. As a specific science, however, natural history has its own story: it is a particular way of seeing the natural world. I find a correspondence between the presuppositions of this discipline and the larger concerns of *Predators* which helps to clarify the special use Dewdney makes of the sciences.

In his history of epistemologies (*The Order of Things*), Michel Foucault argues that natural history, as a specifically "scientific" discipline, only became distinguished from general histories in the 17th century. This new isolation of natural history marked a splitting of *scientia* into a science based on empirical observation on one hand, and document and fable (the "story" part) on the other. The legends which were part of the history of any plant or animal prior to that period were to enter the domain of literature, while the physical properties of the organism became the business of science. The development of natural history was made possible by a concerted effort on the part of Classical scientists to purge language of its literary "untruths"--its metaphors. (Foucault cites French authors, but for a comparable development in English thought we have Bacon, Hobbes and Sprat). This language of science--what Foucault calls representation--presupposed the possibility of *naming* a self-evident visibility, or "of seeing what one will be able to say" :

The descriptive order proposed for natural history by Linnaeus, long after Jonston, is very characteristic. According to this order, every chapter dealing with a given animal should follow the following plan: name, theory, kind, species, attributes, use and, to conclude, *Litteraria*. All the language deposited upon things by time is pushed back into the very last category, like a sort of supplement in which discourse is allowed to recount itself and record discoveries, traditions, beliefs, and poetical figures. Before this language of language, *it is the thing itself that appears, in its own characters, but within the reality that has been patterned from the outset by the name.*³ (emphasis mine)

"Linnaeus a certain key," Dewdney says in *The Cenozoic Asylum*. According to Foucault's analysis, the "key" offered by natural history was a key to the knowledge of the "thing itself." But the point of Foucault's argument is that this knowledge was purchased by a failure to consider both the limitations of the mechanics of vision, and the mediating effect of language-as-system.

Foucault goes on to say that within the Classical *episteme* the history of life forms was imagined as a continuum of identities

and differences. This continuum differed from later evolutionary theory in being conceived, not as a process of change internal and discrete to the organism, but as an actualization of a potential already present from the "Beginning": the universe was once a larva; it will one day become a butterfly.⁴ It is worth noting, considering the use Dewdney makes of fossils, that monsters and fossils were elements essential to the Classical taxonomy in that they completed the continuum. The monster provided evidence of transition between species; the fossil was a sign of original identity.

The presuppositions of Classical thought have been well disputed. In the 19th century, Foucault says, natural history gives way to a biology, in which the basis for classification is not the visible structure of the plant or animal, but the invisible function of its internal life system. Similarly, language is rethought as an internally coherent "organism." Words are no longer defined by their content (although the word "does not cease to have a meaning and to be able to 'represent' something in the mind that employs or understands it"), but by their place in "a grammatical totality." Language becomes an object of study for philologists of the 1800's, and as object, it begins to lose its transparency.

In his essays of the 1930's and 40's on comparative linguistics, Benjamin Whorf stresses the independence of linguistic structures from the representational function of language. He suggests that the hidden patterns of language are determinants of thought. Whorf's conception of language as a system functioning beyond the control of individual speakers is diametrically opposed to Classical notions of representation. In "Language, Mind, Reality," in a passage which Dewdney quotes in "Parasite Maintenance," he says,

It is as if the personal mind, which selects words but is largely oblivious to pattern, were in the grip of a higher, far more intellectual mind which has very little notion of houses and beds and soup kettles, but can systematize and mathematize on a scale and scope that no mathematician of the schools ever remotely approached.⁶

Whorf's theory of language as a transcendent medium implies that the "objectivity" of scientific discourse, an objectivity which first finds its expression in natural history, is just as mythical as the fables it was meant to supercede. Classical scientists did not achieve an unmediated vision of nature: rather they unwittingly helped to establish a mythology of objectivity which functioned within the mediating patterns of language.

Dewdney's natural history begins here, in a remarkably *symmetrical* inversion of the mythology of objectivity: language is a kind of representational *system*, but it is a system convoluted to

the point of autonomy ("The glass machinery . . . which regenerates itself with its own repetitive logic" [PA, 56]). (There is a difference between inverting a system and deconstructing it. Although there is a similarity between Dewdney's work and that of deconstructive critics--both draw attention to the hidden presuppositions of systems of thought--Dewdney makes a *counter-mythology* of the supposed verities of such systems. Deconstructive criticism, itself a non-system, offers a *negation* of myth--or rather in the interest of truth it reveals truth as a fictitious composition.) Dewdney's inversion of representation and its implicit assumptions of control, historical continuity and the self-evidentiality of the visible, is held in a complicated series of poly-connotative images, which mutate in and between his various books. I read these books as one long poem, and it is as such that I will treat the selection in *Predators*.

Some of Dewdney's most important figures have their beginnings in "Transubstantiation." In this poem he introduces the fossil, and it functions as one image of language, in the largest sense of that term. The fossil is what remains after the "flesh of these words/disintegrates" (PA, 20). Language achieves its apotheosis into the "Living Word," as Dewdney calls it in "Parasite Maintenance," when the effect of the spoken word is lost. In this later piece, he describes the "Word" as "the signifier signified exponentially into the realm of pure being."⁷ When the connotations immediate to the occasion of speech are lost, words become detached from what they once signified. As the language evolves, it begins to escape its speakers:

The synchronus communolect of the times, the connotative properties of the legend, are like the soft parts of a decaying fish, they rot away and leave only the skeleton to be preserved as a fossil. However, they do not really rot away in the sense that a real fish decays. Instead it is as if the fish's flesh was continuously re-assembled, fossilized particle by particle, over centuries of changing in the living language; a living fossil whose flesh transubstantiates itself in the wind of dialectic modification. Therefore, because the words in some cases remain the same we are fooled into believing they mean the same thing. However, the interpretation changes at exactly the same rate as the interpreters change, making it an invisible process. (AS, 81)

In the 17th century, the language of science was designed to bring the natural world under control: ideally the same word would

always denote the same thing. But because language continually evolves, it never functions as a stable currency. Something is always lost in the transaction. The lost residue is "transubstantiated" into the living language. Information mutates to "In formation" ("Transubstantiation")--or hidden formations (Whorf) of a language which exists independently of the intentions of its speakers, and which in fact determines and limits intentionality.

If the fossil confirmed the continuity of history for Classical scientists, it suggests the opposite in the context in which Dewdney places it. Language becomes "autonomous" because its references are discontinuous with those of an earlier period. Evidence of this fossilization process exists in the "communolect":

The communolect is the living language speaking in tongues. It says; 'You pulled a few strings & now you're in over your head. You're going to change your tune when you face the music.' (AS, 80)

These idiomatic phrases cannot be reduced to the dictionary meanings of the words which compose them. They suggest the process of "dialectic evolution":

No single person changes the language. In an election rigged by the communolect, a dominant lingo is voted into office, there is no choice; the language is mutating by itself. (AS, 81)

For the individual speaker, this means loss of control.

There is a network of images in *Predators* related to this exposé of the living language. A mirror image, for instance, suddenly opens into a three-dimensional scene in which the subject is faced with another "human trapped in the room behind the mirror." In a moment of non-recognition, with the "room breaking into flashing white fragments" (PA, 153), "I" becomes a stranger. "'I' is an illusion," Dewdney says in "Parasite Maintenance." There is no "homunculus." His mirror exposes the fragmentary, discontinuous condition of the self, as well as the foreignness of its composition. Just so, language is no longer a passive reflector of the subject's ideas; it becomes a "Governor," or vampire in a language coup made by a discourse programmed for power. If natural history was meant to place the human subject apart from nature, as master of it, the animation of the "mirror" puts man back into nature. The predator becomes an organism preyed upon, controlled by alien systems. In "On Fossilization," "remote control" and its agents replace reality with a facsimile. The agent can plant a fiction and leave its reification to the process of fossilization:

(Remember; the emotions you are feeling may not be your own.)

Of every seven years we are entirely re-composed. That from which we are made, what we see out of, is completely transmuted in a transubstantiation of actuality. The replacement of reality with fiction is the same process. The rug is pulled in front of your eyes off a facsimile of itself. Remote control alien replacement of all that which you call tangible (PA, 104).

If the "reality" that is being replaced was once a fiction too, then "all that which you call tangible" is always just a thickening in the plot.

The reference to vision in this passage--"what we see out of"--is only one of a multitude of references to seeing in *Predators*. Dewdney's investigation of the mechanics of vision is a necessary adjunct to his exploration of the living language. This language, itself "invisible," operates through the interpretive apparatus of the brain to shape the visible image. In "Transubstantiation" it is just the unmediated reality "we wish to inhabit"--"just the bread, just the wine." But as Dewdney says in "Fovea Centralis II," the "eyes of a man" are "seen through himself" (PA, 32), and "himself" is presumably under the control of the living language. The "fish machine" cannot see itself in a mirror because "It exists with its mirror image superimposed / on each notation of its existence . . ." (PA, 79). It cannot see itself looking. Dewdney's poetry could be read as a sustained effort to catch the processes of seeing at work. The "virtual image" of "Alter Sublime" is the illusory image of an object reflected and displaced in a glass or mirror. It owes its existence to the interpretations of the mind: "it is the mind/eating itself" (AS, 12). In *Brain Mechanisms and Mind*, Keith Oatley, one of Dewdney's sources (cf. footnotes to "Parasite Maintenance"), notes that two-dimensional images on the retina have to be interpreted into the three-dimensional space we perceive. He goes on to say that

Perception . . . must be the business of interpreting patterns of receptor stimulation as objects, their attributes and relationships; and creating in the mind of the perceiver, as a sort of model, the world towards which he directs his actions We can therefore distinguish not just the domain of objects in the external world (the distant stimulus) and the domain of patterns of receptor stimulation, but also the domain of

percepts which are the creative interpretations of the mind

Reality and illusion are seen by the same perceptual processes. It is not the fact of illusions that should be regarded as odd. As Wittgenstein remarked, "We find certain things about seeing puzzling because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough."⁸

The virtual image immediately evokes "the Word." What is uncanny about this determined vision though, is its symmetry with the outside, a symmetry which parallels that between "reality" and the fiction substituted by the remote control agent. Somehow we do function in space. In "Radio symmetry":

At everything we see
occipital a reconstruction retinal
Mind imparting a clarity
unoptical. . . .

'Seeing as is.' they believing say. (AS, 26)

This is a situation in which "Everything / you say will be used against you."

The paranoia suggested by this statement, in fact the paranoia of the whole cluster of images which centre around control--the remote control agent; the Governor, set up by "this independent intelligence, the living language" (AS, 82); the vampire that replaces blood with "the desire for (itself) blood" (PA, 83)--is part of Dewdney's effort to bring to cognition whatever is too familiar to "see." The living language is threatened by only one thing: "the discovery and subsequent exploration of its plan of existence by ourselves, its human host" (AS, 83). The exposure of the living language involves both the de-familiarizing of the given structures of consciousness (what is most familiar becomes alien), and the transgression of the limits of those structures. On "the (other side of) the other (way) side" the categories established by the living language break down. "This is of two worlds," Dewdney says, "the one diurnal men know and that other world where lunar mottled eels stir like dreams in shallow forest water" (PA, 56). The world of luna is synaesthetic, a "rain of sensorium." "The skin, neither moist nor dry" becomes a "permeable membrane" (PA, 56). Distinctions which separate the inside from the outside are no longer valid, just as the distinctions between past, present and future begin to evaporate as Dewdney turns a Silurian landscape into a new and unexplored terrain. In the log entries which function as reports

scribbled from this unknown place, we come across "Newton laughing hysterically / in the rubble of the launch" (PA, 47).

The contemporary science which best answers to this model of the two interpenetrating worlds is quantum physics, the science which might well have prompted Newton to hysterical laughter. It is a science concerned with the minutest invisibilities of matter (the reverse of a natural history based on visible structures) and it is also a science which has most dramatically called into question the certainties of objectivity. While the micro and macro worlds operate according to different laws, the microworld, with which we have no direct sensual contact, does affect macro-reality--not just through the technology its discovery makes possible, but sometimes through "accidents." In his history of contemporary physics (*The Cosmic Code*), Heinz Pagels explains that the new computers of the 1980's are subject to "soft errors." Because their components are so tiny, stray particles may affect the microscopic switches, causing the computer to malfunction. There is no way to prevent or correct these errors. The malfunction is temporary, because no component of the computer has been damaged. The source of the disturbances, Pagels says, "is the natural radioactivity in the material out of which the microchips are made or cosmic rays raining down on the earth."⁹

The solidity of the macroworld (the visible "Newtonian" world) is preserved by ignoring such accidents and details. But in Dewdney's log entries, "accidents [become] deliberate" (PA, 39). "Some Accidents" is a poem consisting of a list of violent mishaps which all involve bodily damage--penetration of the skin. And as Stan Dragland points out in his "Afterword" to *Predators*, Dewdney allows certain accidents to become part of his writing. "Theiyr" "was a typo that kept appearing until he just accepted it" (PA, 195). The point is that such accidents, like the accidental intrusions of quanta in a computer, offer scraps of evidence of a world which composes macro-reality very literally, and yet which is entirely alien to perception. As Dewdney says, "For that which is most completely out of control most clearly reveals the workings of the unseen machinations" (PA, 138).

For the poet, however, simply taking cognizance of the alien element within what seems familiar is inadequate. In "Parasite Maintenance," Dewdney explains how the poet circumvents the restrictions imposed by the living language. This piece is a pseudo-scientific argument for the efficacy of the creative imagination: by cultivating "a sort of voluntary paraphasia," the poet can reorder the neural circuitry of the brain. This "cryptic and capricious circuitry" is the Parasite (AS, 90). "Parasite Maintenance" does actually come close to the speculations of some neurologists. Wilder Penfield discusses the programming of the

speech centres and interpretive cortex of the child in *The Mystery of the Mind*. John Eccles, in *The Human Psyche*, proposes a relationship between the imagination and the physical structure of the brain which seems to imply that imagination can effect plastic changes. It is clear, though, that Dewdney is not trying for an empirical version of the brain-imagination relationship, especially in statements such as this:

Because the Muses are the daughters of memory it seems reasonable to assume that the neurotransmitters whose altered levels determine the boundary of the Parasite would also be memory specific (AS, 90)

So what are we to make of "Parasite Maintenance"? Perhaps Dewdney is acting as remote control agent and replacing the science we tend to regard as true with a symmetrical fiction?

In literary terms, the Parasite is not such a new creation, as Dewdney is quick to point out:

. . . the literature is fraught with references to it; Rimbaud's '*dereglement de tous les sens*', Keat's 'negative capability' etc. (AS, 90)

Or as Dragland notes, Dewdney's sense of language as a closed system the poet must break through, recalls Jack Spicer's theory of dictation: the source of the poem is the "outside." Similarly, the Parasite functions outside the poet's preconceptions: "It releases the conceptual hold of the Governor slightly and allows the mind to fuel the Parasite itself into the realm of nirvana, though the mind does not follow it . . ." (AS, 91). In other words, the Parasite holds the lure of an immediacy beyond that possible within the sticky medium of the living language. In this sense, Dewdney's "natural history" is not so very different in intention from that of the Classical scientists (" . . . we wish to inhabit / just the bread, just the wine"). But the language which was the means through which these scientists sought to achieve this immediacy becomes, in Dewdney's poetry, the chief obstacle to its attainment.

I have already suggested that Dewdney reverses the mythology of objectivity which still dominates the natural sciences and governs everyday perceptions of reality, despite the tentative head-scratchings of neurologists and physicists. The significance of this reversal becomes clear in the context of Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity*. Monod, another source for Dewdney,¹⁰ is a microbiologist and an amateur philosopher. In *Chance and Necessity*, he attacks what he sees as vestiges of animism (intentionality) in evolutionary biology and in social and political

thought (he selects certain Marxists theories for special attention). Science, Monod says, occupies a privileged position in modern conceptions of truth, and yet the "objectivity" of science undermines the religious and cultural myths which form the basis of Western ethics. In a statement which sounds almost Classical he says:

The moment one makes objectivity the *condition sine qua non* of true knowledge, a radical distinction, indispensable to the very search for truth is established between the domains of ethics and of knowledge. Knowledge in itself is exclusive of all value judgement (all save that of "epistemological value") whereas ethics, in essence nonobjective, is forever barred from the sphere of knowledge.¹¹

Hence the "modern soul's distress," caught in the dualism of the two truths: the "real" truth of science and the mythical (read imaginary) truth of the religions (add literature) which form the ethical base of the culture. We are on shaky ground. The two-truth system is stretched to the breaking point, and no amount of whistling in the dark is going to re-establish the supremacy of an ethical system—a religious mythology. From Dewdney's perspective, however, it would seem that "religion" means both the conventional religions Monod attacks (be they unrevised Marxism or Christianity), and the "religion" of scientific objectivity. The "altar sublime" of "Transubstantiation" mutates to an imperative, "alter sublime."

In *Predators*, Dewdney moves toward a new unity of *scientia*, by drawing the concerns of the "hard" sciences into the realm of literary-philosophical-linguistic speculation. The natural histories preceding those of the 17th century--Pliny's, for instance, 77 A.D.--offer that kind of fusion of story, observation and speculation which Classical scientists struggled to separate. In creating a type of science-fiction, Dewdney moves toward a similar kind of fusion, but with an added consciousness of the limitations of his medium. A history of nature that implicates the perceptual systems of the human creature in the writing of it is still to be written. "We are informed" (PA, 75).

NOTES

1. These are *A Palaeozoic Geology of London*, *Onatrio*, *Spring Trances in the Control Emerald Night*, *Fovea Centralis*, *The*

Cenozoic Asylum and Alter Sublime. I will be using *Predators* for all references except those from *Alter Sublime*. The selection from the latter in *Predators* does not include "Parasite Maintenance."

2. Christopher Dewdney, *Predators of the Adoration* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), p. 123. Hereafter cited as PA.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. of *Les Mots et les choses* (New York: Random House, 1970; Vintage Books Edition, 1973), p. 130.

4. Foucault, p. 152.

5. Foucault, p. 280.

6. Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1956), p. 257.

7. Christopher Dewdney, *Alter Sublime* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1980), p. 79. Hereafter cited as AS.

8. Keith Oatley, *Brain Mechanisms and Mind* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 97.

9. Heinz Pagels, *The Cosmic Code* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1983), p. 125.

10. Dewdney quotes Monod in *Spring Trances in the Control Emerald Night & The Cenozoic Asylum* (Berkeley: The Figures, 1982). The quotation is omitted in *Predators*. Monod is also included in the list of references to "Parasite Maintenance," p. 92, *Alter Sublime*.

11. Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 174.

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NUMBER FIVE SPRING 1985

IN THIS ISSUE

*

A GERRY GILBERT SECTION

*

FEATURE ESSAY ON CANADIAN FICTION
BY GEORGE BOWERING

*

LETTERS BY STEVE McCAFFERY
RON SILLIMAN & CHARLES BERNSTEIN

*

ALAN R. KNIGHT
ON THE TORONTO RESEARCH GROUP

*

MIRIAM NICHOLS
ON CHRISTOPHER DEWDNEY