

Strings I guess a. mach '55
going over ———
Hunder in the
distance &
spiders starting
to crawl —
Home

line

number six

A Journal of Contemporary Writing
and its Modernist Sources

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As a journal published in co-operation with The Contemporary Literature Collection, *Line* will reflect in its content the range of the collection. The materials it plans to publish—archival items, interviews, essays, review/commentaries, and bibliographies—will be related to the line of post-1945 Canadian, American, and British writers whose work issues from, or extends, the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.

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Cover: section of a letter by Lorine Niedecker.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

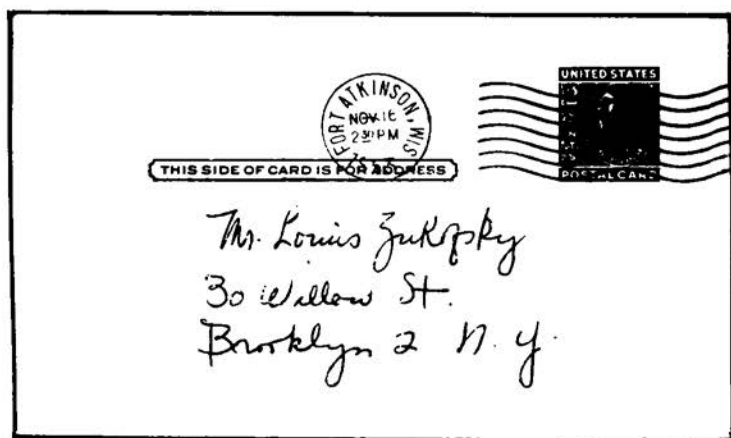
We are pleased to include in this issue some material from the "New Poetics Colloquium: A Celebration of New Writing," a conference sponsored by the Kootenay School of Writing, August 22-24, 1985, at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver. The essay/talks by Lyn Hejinian and Bob Perelman were read there, and another participating writer Bruce Andrews sent us his compressed review shortly after the gathering. Readers can look forward to the future publication of the entire proceedings by the Kootenay School of Writing.

The Guard by Lyn Hejinian is published by Tuumba. Bob Perelman's *Primer* is available from This Press; *The First World* is forthcoming. Roof Books has issued Bruce Andrews's recent book *Wobbling*. Rumour is that *Zygal* by bpNichol is finally forthcoming from Coach House. George Bowering's latest book of poems, *Seventy-one Poems for People*, has been published by RDC Press. Longspoon Press has published Daphne Marlatt's *Touch to my tongue* and has also issued a new edition of her *Steveston*. Jenny Penberthy has recently completed a Ph.D. study, *Lorine Niedecker and Louis Zukofsky: Her Poems and Letters*. Robert Hogg's essay is taken from a forthcoming book on Charles Olson, *Maximus in Dogtown: A Topology of the Soul*. Brian Edwards who sent us his piece from Australia has essays forthcoming in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature and Essays on Canadian Writing*. Peter Quartermain is writing a study of Basil Bunting. My apology to John Tutlis for calling him "Charles" in the last issue.

RM

December 26, 1985

POEMS FROM LETTERS:
THE
LORINE NIEDECKER-LOUIS ZUKOFSKY
CORRESPONDENCE
BY JENNY PENBERTHY



Poems From Letters:
The Lorine Niedecker–Louis Zukofsky Correspondence

The flood is subsiding and maybe the monsoon has passed. The birds and animals came close, practically inside the house because on two sides I had only a couple of feet of land. A flood in the summer here is like a tropical jungle. The Amazon flowed through just in front of my thick growth of dogwood. Here a large (very fat) muskrat swam—they seem to swim with their noses as that's what you notice first—and came out on the shore to sun himself. What's more wet looking when it's wet than a rat? My family of king rails worked for food, whacking at little crab-like things sailing along but rails are really very shy. Once a rabbit and a rail were eating away both absorbed, looking down—suddenly they came face to face and both jumped back. Rabbits not having bills are quite peaceful creatures—and always nibbling—it's a wonder there's any grass left in this world. I seem to have planted my gladioli for them. Living in the teeming tropics under jungle law I wasn't surprised to find two blood spots on my cement steps and not far away a decapitated young rabbit. I had turtles too of course in my mud flat—I can't be sure of the difference between their noises and bull frogs' but I think it's turtles that have that deep thing, always three times, from evening to two in the morning. I'd wake up in my sleep and wonder what all those dogs were doing barking around my house. One day there was a water spaniel (rhinoceros) plowing through—I soon got him out of there with my cannon-like voice and clapping of hands (bring-em-back-alive-Niedecker) as every time a dog gets excited over a bird and jumps on the soft lawn he leaves a hole. Lots of snakes of course, one disporting himself on a young willow like Spanish moss. I notice frogs get eaten in quantities by almost everything. Mozart's Air and Chopin much too delicate for this country but beautiful moonlight nights.

(August, 1950)¹

This is an extract from one of the many letters Lorine Niedecker wrote to Louis Zukofsky during their 40-year friendship. The pages that follow provide an overview of the correspondence—particularly Niedecker's side of it—and of the substantial role that it plays in the composition of her poems.

In the mid-1930s when Niedecker was still experimenting with different poetic styles, Zukofsky remarked that her letters were her best writing. Apart from their importance as critical and biographical documents, the letters—Niedecker's largest production—make compelling reading in themselves. Both she and Zukofsky edited her side of the correspondence and what remains is an often uneven distribution of letters and fragments from the years 1937 to 1970. Incomplete as they are, the 600-odd mostly typed pages constitute the only substantial surviving prose history of Niedecker's poetic career up to 1964. They go some distance towards reconstructing the background of a poet who is not yet a visible part of American literary history.

Zukofsky also wrote more letters to Niedecker than to any other friend. "On Valentine's Day to Friends," written in 1952, places her among his closest.

The hearts I lift out of snow
 So few,
The one, two or three, say few
 Friends who
Eye a heart, wish well what
 I do,
Befriend its festival
 When to
Persist I sing of Celia and
 Of Paul
To R'lene and Edward, Lorine,
 Or all—
Tags, Rene—that can with a red heart,
 Valentine,
Brush a white-velvet heart in snow
 falling deep to speak
 Be mine.

(*All*, p. 141)

Little evidence remains of their friendship in the thirties other than three fragments of her letters (tentatively dated 1937) and a fuller but equally scrappy selection of his. The correspondence is intimate and punctuated with square brackets that serve as a characteristically restrained signal of deep understanding. In a letter dated "pre-1936" by Niedecker, Zukofsky explains the significance of the brackets. They signify, he suggested, the gap of distance that divides the two

friends, a gap that is simultaneously framed and narrowed by their rapport. Both poets use the brackets throughout their correspondence (though less frequently after the 1930s).

They share talk about their physical ailments—in 1968 she writes, “a strange age: ill health is more interesting than good health” (December 27, 1968)—and about their finances (“phynances”); they send annual Valentines and birthday and Christmas presents; Celia and Louis urge her to move permanently to their Old Lyme cottage in Connecticut—she talks of merging their “two civilizations”; and Niedecker provides ceaseless admiration for all three Zukofskys. Whatever the personal ties, her chief preoccupation was always poetry. “In after years if they ever talk about me and ask ‘was she ever in love’ they’ll have to say, ‘yes, she was in love with Zukofsky’s words’” (January 12, 1947).

Niedecker’s letters give full accounts of the difficulties of her daily life but also, incidentally, of the opportunities that it provides for her particular poetic temperament. Besides the seasonal floods there are smaller domestic struggles, many of which become subjects for poems—the endless mowing, the chopping down of trees and the competition with rabbits and frost for vegetables and flowers. The details are all included in her letters to Zukofsky. Nothing is too domestic to record. Her letter-writing style is chatty and unstudied. She combines easily the ironic juxtapositions, the oblique allusions and the insights of a practising poet at work and talking to another.

Zukofsky is quite clearly her artistic life-line and, of course, her closest friend. His letters and the less regular notes from Celia and Paul help to make it possible for her to manage the rigours of a lonely life on Black Hawk Island. She wrote to him on April 1, 1956: “The world is so busy rushing past my door on road and river that it makes me feel I’m going somewhere to write to Willow St.” Besides offering her the sustaining engagement of friendship, the correspondence crucially serves her poetry. It provides her, first of all, with literary conversation which is not locally available. Zukofsky keeps her in touch with his own circle. She asks him about Basil Bunting over the North Sea, Ezra Pound in Pisa and St. Elizabeths, and in New York, William Carlos Williams, Charles Reznikoff and Marianne Moore. Zukofsky replies in detail to her questions about his work; he offers suggestions for improvements to her own poems; he passes on letters from literary friends; he keeps her supplied with magazines and newspapers; he recommends reading. She types his poems, comments on them, and immerses herself in the tradition he espouses to the point where, in 1952, after reading a manuscript copy of “A”-12 (a poem dense with literary and personal allusion), she is able to boast that she has understood the poem without the aid of the bibliographical notes he offered her. His reading was hers too. Even so, her judgements about good and bad poetry are confidently declared: “Deckers have gotten out for 1945 August Derleth and

Ruth Lechlitner, both tripe, especially the former ... HD has a new book, not, I understand, of the common speech" (April 25, 1945). She doesn't defer to him.

Over the years, Niedecker had urged Zukofsky to keep only three of her letters. However, she clearly felt some ambivalence about the finality of her instructions:

Zu, why don't you clean out your files of my letters since June 1946?—You have from the old days the letter on the visit to the Kumlien cabin. Now you have the one on BP's death and funeral. And you have this. Paul has the one I mailed him the other day. OK? You have three letters from me. What you should do is clip—but Lord no, you haven't the time—it isn't worth it. Just three.

(February 14, 1952)

Zukofsky chose to keep the file. On a visit to New York in June 1947, she and Zukofsky had edited all her letters to date. The remaining letters leave little indication of why the editing began at all, but Zukofsky's insistence that it be done suggests that he expected his letters might eventually be read. He evidently preferred that the more personal content be removed. It was his habit to preserve the history of his own manuscripts with painstaking care, as if he were preparing them for an archive. The knowledge that editing of one kind or the other would take place must have protected both these fastidious writers from impeding self-consciousness.

In 1953 Zukofsky decided to gather for publication a selection of letters written to him by friends between the years 1927 and 1953. He planned to include selections of letters from Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Basil Bunting, Niedecker, and others, and to arrange them so as to present an informal history of modern poetry within an immediate, lived context. Again he turned to the task of editing letters he had received from Niedecker. He made even more cuts in those they had been through earlier. In 1961, after failing to get permissions to publish either Ezra Pound's or Basil Bunting's letters, Zukofsky was forced to abandon the project. Niedecker's letters continue to be heavily edited until 1960, probably still for the contemplated book, but thereafter the editing is cursory and the letters that survive are intact. In 1964, in exchange for the publication of *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin accepted Zukofsky's books, manuscripts, letters and papers. Niedecker's edited letters and a limited sample of her poetry and prose manuscripts were among them.

What remains of Zukofsky's side of the correspondence is also only a fraction of its original size. The selection of letters and fragments² now held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center,³ was made entirely by Niedecker. Only about forty letters and twenty postcards remain uncut. The rest

of the collection exists in tantalizing pieces which she mounted on blank paper, numbered and ordered roughly by date. Most of them are undated though occasionally she has approximated, e.g. "Summer 1945." Parts of the letters are marked up—underlined, encircled, titled (e.g. "Frobenius," "When LZ first saw Pound's Cantos," etc.) and with some the scissored context is provided in her hand. The marks of different pens on the same passages suggest that the editing took place over an extended period of time. Niedecker had completed one, perhaps the first, editing of his letters in 1951:

If you—when you come here and read your letters to me—excerpts I've kept (on general topics more or less as I've explained to you, nothing that could bring embarrassment to anyone—you'll see what a wonderful man of literature you really are!

(September 28, 1951)

She has to assure him a number of times that she has destroyed all the entirely personal content.⁴ She writes on February 13, 1961: "I've cut out purely personal and *strong* comment that might embarrass somebody. Actually I don't have to cut out very much but my aim was to save those parts that are so good I couldn't bear to discard 'em." It was for her own parallel edition, prepared but never published, of Zukofsky's letters to her that Niedecker did most of the cutting that leaves his half of the correspondence in its present fragmented state. In 1965, with his permission, she prepared a selection of his side of the correspondence which he eventually was to refuse to allow her to publish. The HRHRC has no record of either original or carbon copies of the 370 page typescript, both of which were in Zukofsky's possession. But at least the actual letters and fragments have survived; the HRC bought them from Niedecker in 1969. With the money she and her husband built a garage on their property and named it, the University of Texas.

Niedecker's editing is not strikingly different from Zukofsky's. She saved a great deal of his talk about poetry and poets. It is rather surprising, and gratifying, to find that she made no special effort to exclude her own presence; she saved many of his comments on *her* work—praise, advice, and passages (particularly those about Paul) that explain the origins of much of her poetry. The editing of both sides of the correspondence results in the shaping of, even redefinition of, their private communication. The remaining letters have an air of intimacy, of shared talk; their subject matter withstands public scrutiny but still reveals much about the poets, their poetry, and their times. In the poems too, there is the same judicious mix of public and private. Furthermore, the work of editing—the effort towards ellipsis and compression—is ideally suited to their critical-poetic preferences. The edited letters themselves move toward

art—an art of quotation, of collage-montage (which both poets refine in their poetry) and an art of the intersection of public and private life.

The successive editings for the two projected collections are in fact later stages of artistic endeavour. Letter-writing itself was closely tied to the composition of Niedecker's and Zukofsky's poems. Both poets, for example, quote from each other's letters in poems. Niedecker's letter on June 16, 1959: "There are words that rhyme but are never used together. You would never use lute with boot!! Apropos of nothing. It's my reaction to drudgery—..." appears in Zukofsky's poem, "Her Face The Book Of—Love Delights In—Praises":

Where She a breath
Comes out of drudgery
Notes a worked out knee deck her daisies
And apropos of nothing
'There are words that rhyme but
are never used together
You would never use *lute* with *boot*—
So she has used them... .

(*All*, p. 209)

Niedecker quotes a Zukofsky letter word for word:

LZ's
As you know mind
aint what attracts me
nor the wingspread
of Renaissance man
but what was sensed
by them guys
and their minds still carry
that sensing

(*Blue Chicory*, np.)

Especially in Niedecker's work, there is a substantial coincidence of style between her poems and letters—both forms derive their trenchancy from ellipsis and compression. The following two extracts from letters to Cid Corman⁵ recall her minimal poems:

Torrential rains, water rising at
Fort, my husband's cucumbers & squash
swimming. Depend on nothing.

(September 14, 1965)

Soft air, today, about to rain, half the leaves
down.

Thank you again, friend—
(October 9, 1968)

In fact, Corman rewrote in verse lines a passage from her letter of February 11, 1965. He called it "Niedecker Weather":

"Well—Milwaukee had
eleven and one
half inches of snow

but no rain. The piles
at street corners are
turning black. Ruskin

would have perished here,
but then, poor man, he
perished anyhow."

[*Origin*, ser. 3, 2 (July, 1966)]

Niedecker's correspondence with friends, and in particular with Zukofsky, is an essential adjunct to critical discussion of her poetic technique. In letters she found models for the scale, voice, and diction of her poems. They are chatty and companionable; they never declaim. Her comment in a letter to Corman confirms this observation, "Poems are for one person to another, spoken thus, or read silently" (May 3, 1967). In another letter to Corman she quotes from Kenneth Cox's⁶ letter to her, "I only try to fit together things I do know ... Your enthusiasm for [William] Morris, for example ... And your love of letters: the delightful, *deshabille* style, talking to someone, not just talking" (Niedecker to Corman, May 15, 1969). This is all that survives of the letter. His praise, surely, extends both to her letters and her poems and makes the association between the two forms. Especially between friends, the language of letters is intimate, unstudied *talk*—co-respondence. And it was that companionable talk that Niedecker felt would be betrayed if Clayton Eshleman⁷ were to publish her few letters to him:

No no no!—please do not print my letters. I was just feeling my way,
interweaving—but I do not want to be known by what I say outside

poems—I don't have poets personally so here was a chance to see you
thru letters that would stay just between you and me.

(February 20, 1968)

Like letters, her poems themselves are communications. She wrote to Cid Corman in October, 1964: "I wish you and Louie and Celia and I could sit around a table. Otherwise, poetry has to do it ..."; and to Jonathan Williams on July 18, 1967: "I told Basil he, LZ and I would see each other around August in *Poetry...*" Her poems are never the narcissistic statements that someone in her isolated position might have written and they have none of the arch self-pity of Emily Dickinson's lines:

This is my letter to the World
That did not write to Me—

Although the poems are personal, they don't insist on the novelty of her experience. They are directed towards another consciousness, another understanding. Before publication, she mailed them out to friends—initially to Zukofsky for his criticisms and then, in the case of the later work, to Cid Corman, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and Clayton Eshleman. George Oppen once addressed this subject of the scaled-down audience in a letter to Charles Tomlinson:

I was troubled while working to know that I had no sense of an audience at all. Hardly a new complaint, of course. One imagines himself addressing his peers, I suppose—surely that might be the definition of "seriousness"? I would like, as you see, to convince myself that my pleasure in your response is not plain vanity but the pleasure of being heard, the pleasure of companionship, which seems more honorable.⁸

If letters explain the character of her style, they also provide insight into her writing habits: they are a compositional middle-ground. A letter to Zukofsky begins: "22 below zero—o a couple of mornings ago it was 38 below... . The other day when it was terribly windy I took a book down and through the space where it was came the cold wind!" (February 5, 1951). Six weeks later she finishes the poem, "February almost March bites the cold." Here are the first two lines:

February almost March bites the cold.
Take down a book, wind pours in. Frozen—
(*My Life By Water*, p. 70)

Indeed, many of her letters make revealing companion pieces to the poems. The following letter and postcard, for example, delineate the compositional method leading to the poem "I rose from marsh mud":

Wish I had a couple weeks more at home. But I made the best of it. A little marshy, soggy piece west of the house that one could almost call the primordial swamp ... I cut grass there and planted willows, my eyes to the green ground so much that I can almost feel sea-water in my veins ... little things like algae, fine-haired weeds mixed with large-blade grass, and I think: Equisetum—little fern-like plants with hollow stems—imagine that!—if equisetum is its name—like the guy that found out he had spoken prose all his life. Lots of wild mint where I want to mow (with corn knife) but I wouldn't, such sweet little things. Everytime I go down there with the intention of mowing I come back without doing it—and I guess my little willows will grow anyhow. I took a walk down a long path beside tall willows out to where the hunters get into their boats for mud lake—thousands of willows shoulder high with reddish leaves toward the tops—I simply pulled 'em out by the roots and lugged 'em home for my own beginning of creation. I worked all yesterday at this and walked miles within a short space. BP went with me on one jaunt. We saw wild sweet peas (bluish purple and much smaller than tame ones) entwined around the tall grasses, the coolest, freshest looking thing. Yes, June is a good month for you to come some day ...

(June 19, 1948)

Dear Zu:

Saturday I arose from my primordial mud with bits of algae, equisetum, etc. ... to attend an expensive church wedding. Whole of history went thru my head, a big step from algae to CHURCH (for some people there can be no procreation without the Church!)*, from cell division to the male sweating it out while the other collects International Sterling Silver and dons and takes off satins and continues to sweat to pay for 'em. The little slave girl bride and the worse slave, her husband.

The killdeer still sitting on the eggs. The much vaunted Instinct in nature may be going astray

* And International Sterling!

(Postcard, June 22, 1948)

I rose from marsh mud,
algae, equisetum, willows,
sweet green, noisy
birds and frogs

to see her wed in the rich
rich silence of the church,
the little white slave-girl
in her diamond fronds.

In aisle and arch
the satin secret collects.
United for life to serve
silver. Possessed.

(My Life By Water, p. 66)

The postcard condenses the letter and the poem condenses the postcard. Niedecker makes a poem out of the conjunction of two apparently distinct experiences. Writing to Clayton Eshleman she referred to her letter-writing as "just feeling my way, interweaving." The poem is the final stage of interwoven thought and language.

Here is an example of a poem written in 1962, expressing some of the anguish of her friendship with Harold Hein. She met him in 1960 and would have married him if he had been willing.

The men leave the car
to bring us green-white lilies
by woods
These men are our woods
yet I grieve

I'm swamp
as against a large pine-spread—
his clear No marriage
no marriage
friend

(My Life By Water, p. 87)

A letter to Zukofsky gives the background to this poem—both to its opening incident and to some of its associative thinking.

Are you lonesome?

I was yesterday when I got Harold's letter saying not coming out this week end. We had a talk last Sun. night, again he said no, he would never marry again. He intends as he told me a year ago to go to Calif. in 4 or five years from now and live with his brother and brother's family. But we both said we musn't lose each other as friends... .

Yes, Manitowish Waters—o what glorious country! ... Too windy and cold for Harold to go fishing so we drove miles and miles on those newly built hard-top roads thru endless woods, meeting maybe one car in three miles. We stopped in one place and our men rushed out to pick Calla of the Swamp or Water Arum for us—greenish-white lilies with heart-shaped leaves.

(July 2, 1960)

Her identification of herself (and womankind) with the swamp-lily was made somewhere between this letter and the poem. After seeing the letter, one realizes that those first narrative details in the poem recount very little of the original experience—they are *private* recollection, cues for the associative pattern that follows.

A later poem provides a fanciful portrait of the expert:

The Greatest Plumber
in all the town
from Montgomery Ward

rode a Cadillac carriage
by marriage
and visited my pump

A sensitive pump, said he—
It has at times
a proper balance

of water
air and
poetry

(*Blue Chicory*, np.)

The poem, of course, represents "a proper balance" of poetry and life. Here is an extract from her letter to Zukofsky:

Mont. Ward man came and fixed pump—he couldn't have done better if he'd been 'the greatest plumber in all London' as Hunt's neighbors called the one that lived near 'em. A model now of silent perfection, that pump, between drawings of water. Greatest plumber poem finished, also one on pump.

(November 18, 1962)

The poem takes liberties with facts but the facts themselves, so we learn from the letter, are the products of hyperbole. Niedecker responds to the spirit of Hunt's neighbors' exaggeration and to her own pleasure in the language and the mended pump. She delights in a capsule drama.

Through the mails, Niedecker became friends with—besides Zukofsky—Edward Dahlberg, Jonathan Williams, Cid Corman, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Kenneth Cox and others. But letters were an important part of her literary life in another sense too: she read avidly the collected letters of writers such as Emily Dickinson, Adams and Jefferson, Darwin, William Morris, Keats, Hopkins, Henry James, Van Gogh, Santayana, Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, Wallace Stevens, Herbert Read, and Edward Dahlberg. More than the form is borrowed from the letters she received or read in collections. She quotes words, phrases, even whole passages. She was drawn to the kind of autobiography which letters incidentally record. Letters offered her the contact with another that orthodox autobiography or biography which is directed at a dispersed, undefined readership, could not provide. Her poems are peopled with figures from her reading of letters, for example:

Asa Gray wrote Increase Lapham:
Pay particular attention
to my pets, the grasses.

(*My Life By Water*, p. 29)

Through letters she established friendships with poets she rarely found opportunity to see in person. She met Zukofsky no more than a dozen times, Jonathan Williams twice, Cid Corman and Basil Bunting only once. Books of collected letters provided further 'friendships' Bob Nero said of her in "Remembering Lorine": "Book characters and what they did in their book reality, were alive for her"⁹ Niedecker told Jonathan Williams, in a letter of course, that "Poetry is the most important thing in my life" (January 10, 1957).¹⁰ Letters take honourable second place.

NOTES

1. All of Niedecker's remaining letters to Zukofsky are housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. No further acknowledgment will be made in the text. Permission to quote all Niedecker material is given by Cid Corman, literary executor of her estate.

2. For a full description of the collection see Marcella Booth, *A Catalogue of the Louis Zukofsky Manuscript Collection* (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, HRC, 1975).

3. In 1985 the Humanities Research Center (HRC), changed its name to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC).

4. It must be noted that Niedecker edited Zukofsky's letters at his insistence. Marcella Booth adopts an unwarranted critical tone: "Miss Niedecker has taken her scissors to the cards and letters ... and has cut them into strips of various sizes ..." (p. 242).

5. Lisa Pater Faranda, "'Between Your House and Mine': The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960 to 1970," diss., Iowa, 1984. This edition is the source of all the Niedecker-Corman letters I quote.

6. Kenneth Cox wrote the first published appraisal of her work for the *Cambridge Quarterly* (Spring, 1969). His preparations for the essay initiated the correspondence. Selections from her letters to him appear in *Lorine Niedecker: The Full Note* (Devon, England: Interim Press, 1983), ed., Peter Dent, pp. 36-42.

7. Niedecker's letters to Eshleman are held in the Fales Collection, Bobst Library, New York University.

8. Quoted by Tomlinson in his tribute to Zukofsky in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, Univ. of Maine at Orono, 1979), p. 82. Also in Charles Tomlinson, *Some Americans: A Personal Record* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1981), p. 50.

9. "Remembering Lorine," *Truck*, 16 (Summer 1975), p. 140.

10. Niedecker's letters to Jonathan Williams are in the Jargon Press Archive in the Poetry/Rare Books Collection, State University of New York at

Buffalo. The letter is quoted by Robert Bertholf in his introduction to *From This Condensery: The Complete Writing of Lorine Niedecker* (Highlands, N.C.: The Jargon Society, 1985), p. xxvii.

FRAGMENTS OF NIEDECKER LETTERS TO ZUKOFSKY

Was shoveling snow the other morning at 5:30
 when big wind & moon was almost setting -
 just like night, bright moonlight &
 lovely [?]. I burn my trash (waste from
 food) on path to river in a spot bare
 of snow. Nights I hang over the
 porch - filling my small oil can
 to fuel oil heater. I go to the folks for
 my drinking water as my own well
 water isn't clear yet - I'm not home
 enough to pump it to the stage
 fit for using. Drafty errands in beaky^{sharp}
 but fair - love it all. An egg
 froze for me in my box on the porch
 but ate it anyway. a bit of life
 in the country, wut? How's your oil
 heater now? Why shd. it refuse to
 work?

Undated, 1947

Northern water Thrush in my back
Pine yard. Last night, very warm, breeze
making the air jump, a whiff of wind
(see?) something that pleases for an hour
or so. (It must be me to
get tired of your own song)

[] Louisa

Strings I guess — a. mach '55
going over —
Hundred or The
distance of
spiders starting
to crawl —
Lorne

Dated, in Zukofsky's hand, c. March 1955

"SYNTAX EQUALS THE BODY STRUCTURE":

bpNICHOL, IN CONVERSATION,
WITH DAPHNE MARLATT AND GEORGE BOWERING



photo courtesy of University News Service

“Syntax Equals the Body Structure”:

bpNichol, in Conversation, with Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering

Edited by Roy Miki

Excerpts from a panel discussion,

July 21, 1982

Simon Fraser University

During the summer of 1982, bpNichol was a special guest in a graduate course on Contemporary Canadian poetry. The Martyrology was on the course, and among other long poems, George Bowering's Autobiology and Daphne Marlatt's Steveston. Since both Bowering and Marlatt lived in Vancouver, they were invited to join bp to form a panel. In the morning, bp had given a reading of recently written work from Martyrology Six. The afternoon affair, convened in the pub seminar room, was loosely structured to allow for maximum interchange among the writers and between the writers and the class (which included some visitors). The edited portion of the discussion attempts to retrieve the threads of continuity without losing the texture of the conversation, though much, some two-thirds or more, was left behind on the tape—and given the disproportionate amount of speech recorded to text printed, I resorted to some splicing for the sake of form. Readers who would like to listen to the talk in all its raw entirety can do so in Special Collections, The Contemporary Literature Collection, in the Simon Fraser University Library, where the tapes are housed. The event was recorded by Kurtis Vanel, and I am very grateful to Susan Lord and Lisa Goldberg for doing the initial transcription for editing.

Roy Miki: After talking to bp, we thought we would begin this afternoon session by asking him a very simple, but perhaps profound question: how does such a long poem as the *Martyrology* begin, and why a title that refers to

“martyrs,” an old term for figures that one would think had been largely laid to rest in the 20th century? George Bowering is here to talk about his writing in *Autobiology*, though of course he won’t confine himself to this one text. Similarly, Daphne Marlatt has agreed to talk about her writing, and in particular about the composition of *Steveston*. Along the way, we’ll also talk about variations on the extended form, the “long poem” as it’s termed.

bpNichol: To begin with, I don’t think anybody sets out to write a 15 year poem. I think I would have stopped if I thought it would take 15 years, because at the time I wouldn’t have been able to encompass it. I was working on a series called *Scriptures*. The title was a sort of layered pun, obviously on “scraps of things,” “scriptures,” and “raptures.” I started that little series with a concretization, a visual re-working of the opening line, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God,” which James Reaney published in *Alphabet* magazine, a long long time ago. About the third or fourth of the series, David Aylward and I discovered these saints’ names in “st” words in the English language. We were looking for a title for a poem by David about killing an asp—he was doing this series of “Asp” poems. He had taken the word “grasp” and had written it “asp arg,” so we had this image of someone choking a snake. This is the way it is in the heady world of avant-garde poetics! Anyway, we both had this image as we were both looking at the word “stranglehold,” and we both simultaneously saw “st. ranglehold,” and thought that it was a marvelous discovery. That was about 1965 or 66, and that’s sort of where it ended for David, but I began to see these “st” words as saints. Then I found that I began to address them—and I literally mean I found, I was not expecting this. I began to address these pretty rabid rhetorical pieces to the saints in *Scriptures*. I realized that these saints had, for me, taken on a meaning and a life; that is to say, they were more than merely puns.

When I started the *Martyrology* in the late fall of 67, I didn’t know what I was starting. Really, the opening lines of the poem were, “december 67 / the undated poem is / found and forgotten,” because I’d stumbled across this poem in a drawer that I could not remember writing, which is an experience you often have, you know: did I write that? I began out of that sense of trying, in that initial moment, of dealing with one’s own history of a writing, that there are things you remember and things you don’t. For me, the most problematic book is Book One. Originally *Monotones* was part of it, but I removed it and made it a kind of an unstated prologue. But I was dealing with the fact that I was writing the thing, and there was obviously a secret book in my mind that I had neither the technical control nor the life experience to get to. That was the idea behind those quotes [in Book One], you know, the sort of little background things. Their main purpose was to point to the fact that there was a larger thing going on that even I could apprehend at that point, and to suggest a larger

history that I hoped would make itself clear as I went along. So I just began, as I so often do in my writing. On the whole I find I am led by my ear, which is very similar to being led by your nose when you come right down to it; I mean you just track the thing and see where it takes you. I had no overall plan, other than that the structure was something that would evolve as I went along. In fact, that's been the way it's been.

RM: What about the title, *Martyrology*?

bp: A friend, Julia Keeler, who used to be a nun, was doing her Ph.D. thesis (I got to know her at the U. of Toronto library) on minor religious poets of the 1590s, and the minor religious poets were truly minor in the 1590s! One marvelous poem she and I both chortled over was called "The Martyrology of the Female Saints," which had some of the worst lines ever written in English language poetry, including the truly epic: "They cut off both her paps and thus ended her mishaps." [Laughter] It was a pretty heavy understatement given the circumstances! Anyway, through Julia I was introduced to that concept of a martyrology, simply the notion that it was a book in which you wrote out a history of the saints. And since, in a curious way, the saints were language, or were my encounter with language, the possibility of the journal form or the utanniki form also opened up—I was writing my history of the saints, my history of my encounter with language and so on. At times I thought it was a little too downbeat, as a title, so you get tempted to change it, but it still seems accurate.

RM: Could you explain utanniki as a form related to the Martyrology?

bp: The utanniki is a classical Japanese form of which Basho was really the first practitioner, with his *Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton* and other great titles. And probably the most famous example is Basho's *Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Issa's *The Year of My Life*. Essentially, what you get in the utanniki is a mixture of prose interrupted by poem, interrupted by prose, interrupted by poem, interrupted by prose, and that linkage goes on. Though that is obviously not precisely what happens in the *Martyrology*, what does happen is a constant formal interruption; that is to say, I'm dealing with form this way, then I'm dealing with form that way. I try to get very articulate when I'm revising, so I know what I'm doing when I revise, but in the moment of writing it's a much more subjective experience and my big check is: is the form evolving? If it isn't, I get worried and a bit suspicious that I've simply started to plug in, and that I've found a convenient form I can shove anything into, which is something I've tried to avoid doing.

George Bowering: Poe says that's the form of all long poems, like *Paradise Lost*. They're all prose interrupted by poetry.

bp: Great!

GB: There must be an essay in there somewhere.

bp: Yes, I sense it, at least worth an MA thesis!

GB: *Paradise Lost* and the *Martyrology*: A Comparative Study.

Jack Miller: bp, in the interview in *Outposts*, you mention that "syntax equals the body structure." Could you explain that statement, and George, could you expand on this by talking about *Autobiology*?

bp: I discovered—and this is what that statement comes out of—that emotionally and psychologically speaking we learn that we often armour the body, the easiest illustration of which is: if I live in a house with a low doorway, I'm probably going to end up walking like this a lot. [Hunching] I've seen tall people do this when they've lived in situations where the ceiling is low. You get an armouring of the body. I discovered that the order in which I wrote my poems allows certain contents in and keeps other contents out, i.e., the syntax I choose, the way I tend to structure a piece, form per se, permits some contents and excludes others. So what I was trying to find, because that is part of a larger thing I've been working towards, is a way to increase my own formal range (something I'm still trying to do), and therefore not merely be stuck, shall we say, by the physical limitation of my body at that point, i.e. just because I'm walking around with my shoulders up like this, if I can learn to relax I can see the world in a slightly different way and so on. If I can keep moving the structure of the poem around, hopefully I can encompass different realities and different ways of looking at things. In that sense, I've always seen a connection between the breathing I do and what comes out of me, the words I do, so syntax/body structure, sequence/body structure, but also the body of the poem. I don't know if that makes it clear or muddy, what I've just said. Muddy, eh? George, explicate that! [Laughter]

GB: What bp was trying to say—!! It's interesting, because I just stumbled across a piece I used in my class this year, that explained T.S. Eliot and certain of the Imagists as people who replaced regular syntax with the syntax of the image. And you've replaced syntax of the image with syntax of the body.

bp: Something like that. In a way, it's an over-condensed statement; it's a conversational statement. I mean, were I to sit down and write that out, I'd probably take about 5 pages—and here I am, yet again, in conversation trying to explain it!

GB: Are synapses a part of the body, or are synapses something that happens between parts of the body? Your poems are built on synapse, right? They live or die on synapse. I don't know, is synapse a thing or the name of an action?

bp: It happens between ganglias!

GB: *Ganglia* hasn't come out for a long time!

bp: *Ganglia* stopped publication in 1966.

GB: Well, it's easy to figure out what body and *Autobiology* have to do with one another. Again, in terms of anecdote, it was when I started writing with a pen instead of the typewriter—I've written with a pen ever since—and that happened because the first piece was written in a kitchen in an Irish working-class portion of London, England where I didn't have a typewriter. I wrote the first chapter of it there, then didn't write any more until I came back home to Montreal and for some reason, I can't remember, took up the poem. There was a happy coincidence between the manner of composition with a pen—it was also written in prose—and the subject matter. Both came together and became the definition of the other, or the extension of the other one.

bp: The only other thing I'd say about that too—when I initially wrote, I was trying to notate my voice as it happened, which is the same, get the syntax down to notate the body, breathing. But then I reached the point where I was able to take the notation and challenge myself with it, as when I do ve-ry or vo-cab-u-lary. Of course, if I walked around talking like that, I'd sound like an idiot. But I can get it to create a very particular sound effect. I can then start to use syntax and, by extension, notation, to push and challenge me in my reading, and to extend the range of the sound that's possible in a piece too. So partly that statement comes out of ruminating about all of that.

JM: Does punctuation fit into this somehow? I was thinking specifically of some of the poems in George's *Autobiology*. Some are punctuated fairly carefully and some have an absence of punctuation.

GB: I think they're all badly punctuated in terms of the logical realist punctuation that you pick up in grade 6!

JM: But why in some and not in others?

GB: The same reason why a lot of things happened with barrie, I was reading Gertrude Stein at the time, but it was probably also related to the fact that I was away from the typewriter for the first time and the involvement with actually seeing words spilling out of a pen—see, the typewriter reifies what the linguists tell us: that every piece of punctuation is absolutely equal to every other little piece of information, i.e. there's a key for it, so when you're typing on a typewriter, it's normal to keep punctuation clear. It's just as much work to make a dash as it is to make a comma, and to make an "n," but when you write with a pen, you can't get the words down as fast, so that information which doesn't go clack when you touch the key just disappears. That's part of it. The other part is that it's true that a lot of punctuation is spoken by the body; I mean, you can hear commas and so forth, but the body was a given in that instance, that's to say, this was really happening, so with that as a given, then the other one wants to float. That's not a logical answer, but it's the answer. Whereas with a typewriter, I think it's really true, what Olson was hinting at, that you can almost bypass the body when you're composing on the typewriter, that it's the brain just using part of the body to get out onto the page—or the mind does perhaps, and that's communal, rather than singular.

Daphne Marlatt: I always compose on a typewriter, and I don't feel that the body isn't there. In fact, I find that there's a kind of rush possible on the typewriter—because you can type that fast—that equates very definitely with certain body states.

GB: My mind's faster than my body.

DM: Well ... yes, but I'm thinking of *Steveston*, and I'm thinking that what I was working with in *Steveston* was very much an orgasmic feeling of trying to gather up everything and move it out—right out to the mouth of the river. I mean, the syntax and body and landscape become totally interwoven. And *Steveston* was all composed on the typewriter. I took handwritten notes while I was down there, but when I came to actually compose, it was on the typewriter.

GB: But *Steveston* partakes of your habit of trying not to get it said—well, filling the poem with parentheses, second thoughts, and the thought that breaks to qualify and so forth.

DM: Well, I wasn't trying not to get it said. I was trying not to arrive at the period. It was trying not to arrive at the end!

GB: It's a backwater coming into the language.

DM: The end of the poem is both what is desired and what you don't want to have happen. Barrie talks about that all the time.

RM: Was the composition of *Steveston* fairly all-consuming for you when you were doing it? Was there any kind of compositional rhythm, as the sequences formed?

DM: There was a rhythm in terms of the trips. I'd go down to Steveston about once or twice a week and I'd take notes in a little notebook. It was very much of a collaboration, because I would often go down with Robert Minden, who was doing the photographs, and we would talk on the way back about what each of us had experienced. And I would avoid sitting at the typewriter that day. I would wait till the next morning, because morning is always the best time for me, and roll in a blank piece of paper and see what came up! That was the immediate compositional rhythm.

RM: Did you have any sense of closure as it was being written? The first poem is definitely a beginning ("Imagine a town"), and the last has a strong emphasis on circles, cycles, completion, beginnings and ends.

GB: But the pieces are not published in the order you wrote them.

DM: No, they're not, and moreover, I didn't think I was writing a long poem. I just thought I was writing a sequence of poems about this place *Steveston*, and I was rather shocked when Michael Ondaatje suggested that *Steveston* is a long poem.

RM: What's the difference between a sequence and a long poem? At what point do sequences become "long," which seems to be an over-riding term. Certain things are discrete units, and as you begin talking about a transformation in which all these discrete particles become part of a larger frame, or larger space, there's suddenly a leap to "long."

DM: Well, yes, you see, I think a long poem builds on itself, and I didn't have any sense that *Steveston* was building on itself. It was more like something was there that each poem was a stab at, was an attempt to verbalize, or articulate.

bp: You thought of it more as a book than as a long poem.

DM: Yes, I thought of it as a book, as a single experience really.

bp: At this point, in a way we don't have the terminology or the terms to talk about the differences between different types of longer structures.

RM: Robin Blaser's sense of serial poem, as I understand it, is the sense of going into a dark room. The lights go on in a single poem of the series, and then go off at the end. There seems to be a de-emphasis upon memory. Every piece in the sequence does not pick up the memory of the previous ones. The poet goes into the dark room for each one, and the narrative evolves out of that movement. But bp's sense of accumulation in his compositional method suggests a process analogous to that of cell-division where nothing is finally ever lost and where memory is important. All of the past is always coming into the present not to determine but to condition the way the present will go in the composition. The poem, then, begins to accumulate a history, which is that point I think that the *Martyrology* can be seen as a long poem. I'm thinking of history in that really literal sense of quantifying time. Of course, a serial poem can be a long poem too, so there are variations of what we call the "long poem" and these require more attention.

DM: You're speaking of the history of itself?

bp: Yes, of the writing. In that sense, there's obviously a big difference between *Steveston* and Michael Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid*, which you can see as vaguely similar types of structures, and *Allophanes* which has a "long" structure.

RM: George, do you think of *Autobiology* and *Allophanes* as sequences, as serials, or how would you describe them?

GB: I tend to think of those two, especially *Allophanes*, as something like a serial poem. *Allophanes* is filled with self-forgetting when it comes time for composing the poem—that you self-forget in order to hear the voice, or in that case voices, that are speaking the poems. And each one clearly has its own integrity, and you don't consciously say: Okay, there are 3 lines of development going on in this poem, and now I have to work each of them to an independent and then a dependent climax, or something like that, what you would get in one of Frost's dramatic, extended poems. The rule that I held for a lot of my poems starting with *Autobiology* was that when I became aware of what the poem was repeating, or what it was concerned with—in that case the intelligence of the body—as soon as I thought of a case or an example that would fit, I would discard that idea entirely. [Laughs] The same thing worked with Part Two,

Curious, the poem about the poets. There were some poets I wanted to be in there, and some poets I didn't want are in there and some of the ones I wanted are not in there, because I already said, "Oh, I know, I'll stick so-and-so in there." The act of composition was an urge, but there was nothing outlined for it, and as soon as something became outlined for it I just chucked it out.

DM: Did you have any sense of connection or none between one individual piece and the next?

GB: Well, I would remember lines. The longer the poem gets—my novels are written the same way—the voice that's speaking to you has various sources and eventually one of the sources will be the poem because it's got so much body to it. So in *Autobiology* I begin to hear the poem which I have not looked at, and certain lines come up over and over again, I guess images too, but more lines or sequences of written words.

Barry Maxwell: The order the pieces were published in *Autobiology*, is that the order you wrote them in?

GB: Absolutely, and the typesetting goes exactly according to what happened on the page, although they're written in prose. When it was first typeset, not in the Vancouver Community Press version but in the McClelland and Stewart version, they typeset it to make its lines end where the typewritten Vancouver Community Press lines ended, so that it was really skinny and all wrong, and when they sent out sheets to be reviewed, everybody thought it was verse. Somebody reviewed it in *Books in Canada* and said it was really terrible verse. After I complained, it was changed for the final publication. But no, the order was exactly as written, so much so that I didn't even know that there's two chapters called "The Breaks" about broken bones. When I wrote the second one I guess I had totally forgotten that I had written another one about broken bones. When I came later to read the poems several months after the first draft was made, I was really surprised to find that I had two chapters with the same name. Since that time, I've never varied from that method.

RM: George, how important was the writing of *Autobiology* for you?

GB: It was really important ... well, it's not important at all in the world, but in my experience it was important, because it got me back to writing with the hand, it got me writing prose, and it got me out of the lyric.

bp: Well, you absorbed your Stein influence at that point.

GB: Yes, in terms of how it caused other writings of mine to happen, it's probably the most important book.

RM: And the breakdown of division between reading and writing that occurs really makes reading a foregrounded experience in that book.

GB: Funny, the writing should be reading that's difficult to follow, because of the punctuation, but it's apparently easy to follow, because of the punctuation. Strange.

DM: The voice is so strong in it, I don't think the punctuation matters.

GB: Very self-reflexive, is what it is.

bp: Wyndham Lewis would have called it the naive voice.

GB: I tend to think of it as the demotic voice. [Laughs]

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Juliet McLaren: Daphne, you said *Steveston* was rearranged. How? What did that do to it?

DM: I wrote it ten years ago, so I'm trying to remember. It seemed to me that the form I was interested in wasn't linear but cyclical. I guess an example would be something like what you do with a kaleidoscope when you turn it and the bits make this ring. Well, that's due to the reflection of the mirrors, but it makes a circular form. And that thing in the middle, which is the unspoken, which is what each of the pieces is working towards, still exists in the centre as that unspoken. So what I tried to do was arrange the poems in a way that would respect that. Now, it had an obvious beginning piece because that entrance piece is very initiatory, and then it had an obvious conclusion. But the conclusion—and I wrote it as a conclusive piece—was really an attempt to recreate the cycle all over again. I don't remember how I ordered the pieces in the middle. I don't remember what the principle was for ordering.

GB: What about the other *Steveston* poems; were they written at a different time?

DM: There were three others, written at the same time. One was published in *Sound Heritage* [Vol. 4, No. 2], a piece I felt really belonged to the whole

Steveston experience, but I couldn't get it right until after the book was put together, so it never appeared as part of the book. The others were sketchier.

GB: But you could have stuck it in when Michael Ondaatje did the *Long Poem Anthology*.

DM: Yes, I know, but then I would have had the problem of trying to figure out where it fitted, its proper place.

GB: So you were saying, no, it doesn't go in there after all.

DM: I still think of it as belonging, but in some more tangible way. And the first *Steveston* series, which appeared in the women's issue of *I's*, was another sequence all of its own, not really about *Steveston*. I started it about *Steveston*, but it turned out to be about Vancouver's skid row.

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Irene Niechoda: bp, I have a question about space in the *Martyrology*. In Books One and Two, almost consistently, you've got a page that's silent, and then there's talking. Then, all of a sudden Book Four just talks! In the Coach House book, that's sliced away, and they've left out the illustrations and everything's just put on the page and it doesn't work as well—

bp: That's just so I'll see how they'll anthologize it after I'm dead!!

IN: I want to know how the silence works with the talking and the illustrations, and the clouds. I also want to know the difference between your use of the clouds in there and your use of the rectangular illustrations on the right hand side of the page?

bp: Right, you don't want to know much, do you? [Laughs] Okay, let me get something out of my mind first, so I can answer your question. I'm still thinking of this syntax thing, which I'd forgotten I'd said. I don't know that I agree with it anymore, the more I think about it. I mean, I agree with the notion I was dealing with, that breathing's an extension of your body structure, and when you're trying to notate your breath, what you're going to get is the syntax of your body. That's what I was saying. But subsequent to that interview, I would say I focused more on learning how to move the line around differently and using notation. In short, it's not an absolute. It was kind of a stab of thought at that time.

When I talked about the formal evolution of the work, that's partly what I'm talking about. Book One deals with, really, each poem occupying its own page. In Book Two the first two sections—"The Book of Common Prayer" and "Clouds"—are that way, but then I began to run the poems over the pages. In terms of the work, that meant the lines were coming at you much more quickly. I take spatial notation as being significant, so those page pauses [in Books One and Two] are full pauses between poems. Whereas when I'm doing them one after the other—like, there's this poem, a little cloud, then this poem—the cloud was just in lieu of using the typographic bullet or the little empty box, or the squig of a man holding a fish in his hand, or whatever you're going to use to separate poems. I thought, why not use clouds, since that was the saints' home. Those were all hand-drawn by Libby at Coach House.

So in Book Three I was dealing with information coming at me much more rapidly. And also, of course, in Book One and in Book Two you're dealing with titled sections, "Friends as Footnotes," "Sons and Divinations." In Book Three I moved away from the title, i.e. implying that what I began to do then was to say, these are becoming less and less discrete sections and more and more they're moving toward being one unit; except that there are a few named sections—the interludes are named. By Book Four, I threw out the idea of section titles entirely. Book Four is really one long poem. It's very interesting how, when you're writing the long poem, the fact that it's happening for you in discrete sections is very nice. It means that even though you're writing the open-ended long poem, you've got this experience of closure, so you can take a deep breath. But in Book Four there was really no room for the deep breath, so that even though it took me a year to write Book Four, it's like being in a constant state of agitation, in a curious way. That was part of the formal evolution.

What happens in Book Five—which is coming out, quick plug, "this fall," he said—is that I begin to deal with chains of thought. I try and track a phenomenon that happens to me, not that frequently, but sometimes you're writing along and suddenly two lines occur to you. This line could go here, or it could go this way; in Book Five I start to write both of them. That became the chains—the writing would branch and this gave you a choice of reading paths. Then what happened as a result of that was, in a way, I'd be writing in a notebook and thinking, what was the last part, well here, okay, continue on from there ... so it's like Book Four in that it's continuous, except that the narrative thread is all over the place. So I began to try and deal with the decentralized narrative. That is, can you have narrative and at the same time decentralize it? Can you "tell the story" and not be sequential? From my experience with Book Five, I think the answer is yes! What you have are twelve different chains. You begin at one point, but really it means that any reader is going to have a different experience of that book. No two readers are necessarily going to have exactly the same experience with that book—which is true

anyway, because every reader comes to a text from a completely different associational base, so what they're bringing to the experience is so radically different from what another reader brings. The chains highlight that reality of the reading act.

Now what's happening in Book Six—I didn't even recognize Book Six when it started, and this has been constantly true for me in the *Martyrology*, which is why you frequently read published statements by me saying the *Martyrology* is now finished. I think it's over and then I realize it's still going on. Fred Wah says I should just shut up and keep writing. A nice combination of thoughts! In Book Six, the writing began to break apart into discrete books, which are really an extension of the chains, the one I branched into twelve chains. In a way there's an implication that any one of those can go in different directions. And that's kind of what happens in Book Six with what I was reading today, the four books that have emerged so far, two of which are finished and two of which aren't.

So that's a kind of a take on the formal evolution of the *Martyrology* that I was talking about. What's always an utter surprise for me is where the form ends up going. Partly it grows obviously out of my own creative dissatisfaction—for example, the middle of Book Three, I got really fed up because it seemed that its structure was like nineteenth century classical music. It was borrowing from symphonic structure. I don't even like nineteenth century classical music, so where was I getting this from? Well, I was getting it through Pound and some of the long poems I'd read, which were using classical musical structures. What I wanted was a sound that was more, to my point of view, contemporary. I wanted, you know, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, I want Ornette Coleman, I wanted M. Kagel, that sort of thing. That's really what pushed me to try to get away from the long, sonorous line I was using in Book Three which kind of reaches a real crescendo there, and then in Book Four it just breaks apart completely.

IN: Yes, it's great. Book Four has got more energy than the other books.

bp: Well, it doesn't feel as ponderous, for sure.

IN: And I guess you're playing with the change in the page colouration and the disappearance of the frames?

bp: Absolutely, that's because my final step of composition is the page. Once I've written the whole thing, which is just written long hand and then typed up and so on and so on, then I get the page proofs. That's when I have to deal with the reality of, here's the form I've chosen, and this is part of the form I've chosen, this machine, so I have to deal with this frame. And even though it's a

long poem, you're dealing with this unit. One of the things that's never really been decided in open verse notation is what happens at the bottom of a page. Does it break in the middle of the stanza, as in prose? Do you just ignore it? Well, I can't ignore it—that's my problem. To me it's a significant break. If the poem breaks there, I have to deal with it. I have to shuffle the poem around to get it to work. Now, because I'm dealing at such length with the poem, in a way I have more choice than the person who's written one tight little poem where every word is precise. I have a lot of compositional choices, just because of the length of the structure I'm working with. In that way I have more freedom, to move.

IN: What about the top of the page, though? Even in Book Four sometimes you start this far down, sometimes you start farther down, and I still take that as a pause—I read that as a pause in sound, but then some of them change. Is that a difference in actual time?

bp: No, that's sloppiness in layout. They should all start on the same line. That a typographic invention, really. That would have been the advantage of using a bullet. They just didn't know how big or small those clouds were going to be. It's just like in real life, the weather's unpredictable.

RM: The book as a form then becomes a limit that has to be taken into account in the compositional process?

bp: You don't in music, but then you've got the stave within the page, which I don't have—or in essence the page is a single stave that I have to deal with, when I'm composing. I've become really conscious of this with Book Five, literally, my final stage of rewrite is when I get the page proofs.

RM: What would McClelland and Stewart do?

bp: I wouldn't publish with them! They think they're really going the distance if they give you a choice of two typefaces! They've really busted their hump for you as an author—"Hey, this stuff's not going to sell anyway!"

RM: Daphne, are you conscious of the book in the sense that bp's talking about, that a page is only so big and people literally have to turn the page so that there's always something hidden now?

DM: It's interesting, I am when I'm writing in short lines. I tend not to write poems that go beyond a page. Sometimes they're a lot shorter than a page. It's always a huge leap to put in a new piece of paper. But I don't feel that way

when I'm using a long line, as in *Steveston*, or when I'm writing prose. And that has something to do with the momentum—the momentum just runs right over the edge of the page.

bp: Of course, there are clearer typographic conventions in prose. In prose, we have learned to ignore the page. The ideal prose notation will be the long, continuous line—ladadadadada—they're reading bytes of information, but there is actually no convention around it in poetry. It's a problem we haven't solved yet notationally.

Shelley Wong: I want to ask Daphne specifically about this matter of space. I asked you once before and you said that in the Talonbooks edition, in terms of starting in the middle of the page, the decision was arrived at by you and the designer Dwight Gardiner.

DM: Yes, and that was because here you actually do have a non-standard, non-8 1/2 by 11 piece of paper which is bound with a bunch of other pieces of paper, so all of a sudden that gives you more possibilities, but like barrie I didn't compose thinking that I would begin half way down the page. It's a decision that gets made after the thing's written and you suddenly have a design editor who's willing to play around.

SW: How did you arrive at that decision to start half way down the page?

DM: Because of the space. I really wanted a lot of white space around the print.

SW: What was the white space doing?

DM: It was for the language to resonate in, and it had something to do with the photographs also. It was a way of giving non-verbal background to the language which was not contained, or containable, in a page as the photos were.

* * *

bp: It's very interesting, when Phyllis Webb's book *Naked Poems* was published originally, I remember there was an outrage in lots of reviews at how much white space she left on the page. People were saying, what a waste of paper! And they didn't mean that the poem was bad; they were really outraged that she wouldn't squeeze it up.

GB: They were complaining how much you had to pay per word to buy the book!

bp: But I think it's precisely with that white space—that's how you suddenly read silence at that point. You know, the word space suddenly magnifies. You're really aware of that white space all the time, but you never foreground it. But when you suddenly leave a lot of white space, you foreground it and it always affects readers, whether they register it consciously or just as a kind of subliminal hit. Their eyes turn the page, and they're looking for type at the top and it's not there. Drop. Which is why, Daphne, you're saying that you read that as significant space. It is significant space. That's why you've got to be careful that your designers do it right.

DM: It was also part of the contradictions of that book, because there's a lot of stillness in Robert's photographs. They're very still photos, and there's a lot of movement in my language. The white space had something to do with mediating that difference, I think.

The business about white space is interesting for another reason. The photos are framed by the white space surrounding them, and I think this also happens with single-page shortline poems—it's very visual, the arrangement on the page, as barrie was saying—but I think something else is at work with the longline poems, something that has more to do with "background" (to use a visual metaphor) or silence (an acoustic one) to intervene between the verbal rushes the poems are. A river, in flood, keeps on rushing, no pauses, no breaks, but I suppose I felt the poems couldn't do that because, besides exhausting a listener, that would suggest something that didn't happen in the composition. They came in discrete rushes, not as one prolonged flood.

* * *

Carol Lane: About voice in your writing, Daphne, I was interested when you said that you composed on the typewriter, because I have a sense of both this incredible rush, and also of a breathlessness, like these breathing pauses. Does the typewriter help that, because it can keep up?

DM: Yes, the breathing pauses punctuate the rush, and so prolong it. And the typewriter invites you to go out to the very end of the possible margin. That had a lot to do with it, because I was coming from very short line poems. The poems in *Leaf/leaves* are very short, sometimes just one syllable, and words are dropping over the line break, in half. It was a high to suddenly say, the line's going to be as long as the page is wide. So there's what I think of as a really prose urge to push always to the end and yet to forestall arriving at it. That fascination with syntax, where you don't think about it but it arrives; you find yourself in situations, and then you respond in the moment, but the situations

are syntactic situations: how do I get out of this one? I'm not ready for a period yet.

* * *

RM: What about the use of the first, second and third person voice in writing?

GB: I write in the third person for the reader, who is me. I guess it's complicated but it's simple in one sense—so that you can't express yourself, and so you can have that experience you have as a reader. If it's written in the third person, you and the composer are looking perhaps at the same angle at the thing, with a little parallax; whereas, if it's written in the first person—

bp: Don't look at me, I write in the first person!

GB: —the reader is made into a second person who is being spoken to, and therefore distanced. That's part of it, and the other part of it probably has to do with puritanism. But you see what I mean. If you're reading, "He did this and he did that ...," you and the writer can maybe even fill the same space.

bp: I write in the first person partly because one of the goals I set for myself when I was 18 or 20 was to find a way to write about completely emotionally loaded material without sentimentalizing it, without "romanticizing" it, and without melodramatizing it. And when I say "romanticizing," I probably mean melodramatizing. Which is harder to do in the first person. I also like the "I." I think you need it in terms of the "we," to articulate that. I'm not a reader who necessarily feels distanced by the "I," either. I find that as the "I" goes on, I start to identify with the "I" if it's speaking in ways I feel some kinship with. To me, that's not necessarily my reading experience, so that could be a subjective reading experience on George's part.

GB: It's not subjective!

bp: Pardon me, on his part; it's not logical, but it's definitely psycho-logical. You get a different effect with the third person, but that's partly the fashion of the times, you know. For instance, Stein's notion of the continuous present, the i-n-g verb, still tends to be unfashionable. We prefer the still photo, the "ed" ending, we prefer it framed. "I shot the picture," as opposed to "I am shooting the picture," frames it, finishes it off, and you move on discretely; whereas in that continuous present, there is no closure. I've heard people in writing classes say, "Never use 'ing' verbs." What a weird statement. What they really mean is they don't like the sound; they don't like that feeling of non-closure. Or they'll

say, "no confessional poetry to magazines." Now Sylvia Plath has got to be one of the big hits of the century, right? Would we call this confessional poetry, or would we call this confessional poetry?

GB: Yes, I was going to say a little while ago that you use the "I" because the *Martyrology* is a kind of confessional autobiography.

bp: Yes, but it's also dealing with the notion of journal. All I'm saying is that you get fashions of the moment that don't necessarily relate to the problems of dealing with the word "I" or the word "he." I mean, it's a different problem to write in the "he"; it can be very difficult to write in the third person impersonal. It can be as tricky for a person to do it as when he writes in the first person. In fact, for some people, when you can tell they can't control the "I"—if you can't control the "I" in your writing, the trick is to write in the "he" or the "she." Then you'll get control of the "I." That's the way you get it.

Rob Dunham: George, what would have happened if you had sat down and started to write "Old Standards" [in *Particular Accidents*] in the first person?

GB: I think I wouldn't trust it. Actually, it's really funny, because I'm writing (as I keep saying I'm not) the beginning of a long poem now, and yesterday I wrote five lines to it, and I'd been trying to write it in the third person. That had worked before, because before that I was writing in the third person in order not to write at the second person. Now, I said, okay I'm going to write in the first person plural to try to write in the first person, and it wouldn't work at all, so I slipped into first person singular, but I made a mental note to come back to that stanza and change it, I don't know how but I'm going to change it—because, immediately I find myself saying, oh! I'm writing in the first person, that means I get to say whatever I want.

bp: So for George, "I" means the license to kill!

GB: When you write "I," I reach for my gun!

RD: When you write "I," you're going to be writing for the next fifteen years.

GB: Ah, but look how the "I" has changed. You've got a totally different "I" now, writing "A Phoenix Too Frequent" Six rather than One. It's a different "I."

bp: That was Steve McCaffery's nickname for the *Martyrology*. When I kept saying it was over, he called it "A Phoenix Too Frequent" Six.

GB: Your first person has almost become for you a third person now.

DM: No, I think that's an important thing, what both of you are touching on. Because the "I" fundamentally has no limits. It can eat up the whole world. And the "he" or the "she" is out there in the landscape. That's part of the difference. It's a limitation.

bp: All of the tons of George's literary essays are in the "I," right? "I, George Bowering was down at the Cubs game eating a bunch of peanuts and drinking beer, when I found myself thinking of Hesiod" ... a typical opening line.

GB: Right, right.

DM: So what is this? Some kind of weird inversion happening?

bp: Most of us would write our essays in the third person. George just likes to flip things around.

RD: The "West Window" poem [in *The Catch*] is in the first person, isn't it? What happened there? [Laughter]

GB: But it's not about my observations. It's about other things that happened, plus it's an imitation of Wordsworth and Keats and other poets, so it's not my "I" exactly.

bp: He's got it tightly rationalized!

GB: No, I just realized—one just realized that! My conversation is in the third person.

DM: That's interesting, because what you've said, George, is that for you, the "I" is a persona whereas for most people the "he" or the "she" is the persona.

bp: And in fact, Daphne, as you were saying earlier, the trick, when writing in the "I," is to find out what the limits are. Getting control of the "I" in your writing is to realize you can't devour the world. You can start here, and you might get as far as there, before you've died of botulism, or something. You just can't do it. That's part of getting control of it, because if it simply becomes an exercise in megalomania, it's bad writing.

* * *

IN: I have a question for bp. Talking about first and third person, what happens when you use the first person "I" followed by a third person verb?

bp: As in?

IN: I have one example here—I know there are more—"I is inside."

bp: Well, often when I'm talking about "I," I'm talking about the "I," that is to say, your I, his I, her I, my I, so on.

IN: As opposed to the "we"?

bp: Or as opposed to the "he". I'm trying to deal with that. See, to me, pronouns are more universal, that's why I like them. I think it's harder for a general reader to identify with an "I," I would agree, but I think that we get into that eventually. He, she, we—it's looser, it isn't named. Naming, though on the one hand it claims, often distances. So in trying to deal with the reality of how we perceive and so on, I often prefer to use pronouns. In those cases, that shift to the third person verb is to indicate that type of usage of the word "I." "I" is an interiorized concept—in short, "I" is inside.

RD: George, I was just thinking about what happens with your third person. Though you say you don't trust the first person because it allows too much subjectivity, there's something very affective about your third person. It has an elegaic quality.

GB: Yes, I'd say that's true. My novel [*Burning Water*] is probably the best way to talk about that because there's an understood "I" who's another George, in other words, Bowering in that text writing the whole thing about "he" or "him." Any time you write, there's an understood "I." So if you're talking in the first person presumably either those two I's collapse or there are two distinct "I"s, one ironically beholding the other one, I guess. You might be right to say elegaic, because there's probably the feeling I'm generally after when it comes to writing. Unlike barrie, I tend to write about something that did happen rather than something that's happening right now. That's a difference between you and me, and might easily be why I go for the "he". You cannot be elegaic with the first person, can you? The other person will say, "Go cry on someone else's shoulder," or, "You may feel a sense of world smear about this, but I don't." In a sense, I'm trying to seduce the reader who says, "Oh well, if you're saying that about him rather than about yourself, then it must be more true."

* * *

Valerie Rodd: bp, I was wondering whether you have the same sense Daphne does about pulling things with you through your *Martyrology*, and possibly not wanting to end the poem as well.

bp: Yes, there's a real ambiguity about it. I mean, on the one hand, I love and embrace the fact that it doesn't end. On the other hand, I do keep issuing these statements saying it's over. As a totally subjective experience, I find writing to be a tension between the sheer delight of writing and kind of an almost unbearable agony about the fact that it's still going on. Both things are true at the same time, you know.

VR: Can you relate that to this whole problem with the I, and the use of the first, second and third person? I think there's something you're going to confront at the end of the poem—

bp: In a way, it's also one of the things I've written about, and I'm consciously trying to fight. It's what I call the immortality game. It was a great experience working at the U of T Library. As you'd go through the poetry sections, there would be literally hundreds and thousands of volumes of stuff that you'll never get around to reading. It teaches you a certain amount of humility. How many of us have really heard of Bertha M.C. Shaw, author of one of my favourite inadvertantly bad titles, "Just Kneel Down on the Good Ground and Kiss It for Me: Request Made to a Soldier on Leave," same wonderful author of "Ode to a Green Strawberry" and other classics.

GB: Published by Fiddlehead Books!

bp: Now, now! In a sense, then, it seemed to me that in a lot of classical structure what you get is a flight from mortality. You build the structure that will live beyond you. Obviously, you die and your works go on beyond you to some degree, assuming there's not some major catastrophe, but on the other hand, you take something like Ur (which is why I got into the whole Dilmun thing), we didn't even know about Dilmun until the tablets at Ur were discovered. I mean, that was literally a lost city. There was no other reference to it until they discovered the tablets containing the Gilgamesh legends, and that's in the 1880s. I had that line in the poem I was reading today, "finally all reference vanishes." So there's a notion of high art that I find impossible to believe in. It doesn't make sense to me. It seems to me that existence is more temporal than that. On the other hand, you're also writing this thing which could exist beyond you—hence that other line, this poem continues—"I die years before this poem can possibly end." When I say, the closure you're

talking about is death, I'm not being facetious. In that act of the thing, you're writing towards its end and its non-end.

GB: You shouldn't say that, barrie, because that means you're going to keep writing that poem till you die, and there'll be some critic in Ontario who'll find the obvious solution.

bp: I thought of that, George. I think I wrote about it somewhere. [Laughs]

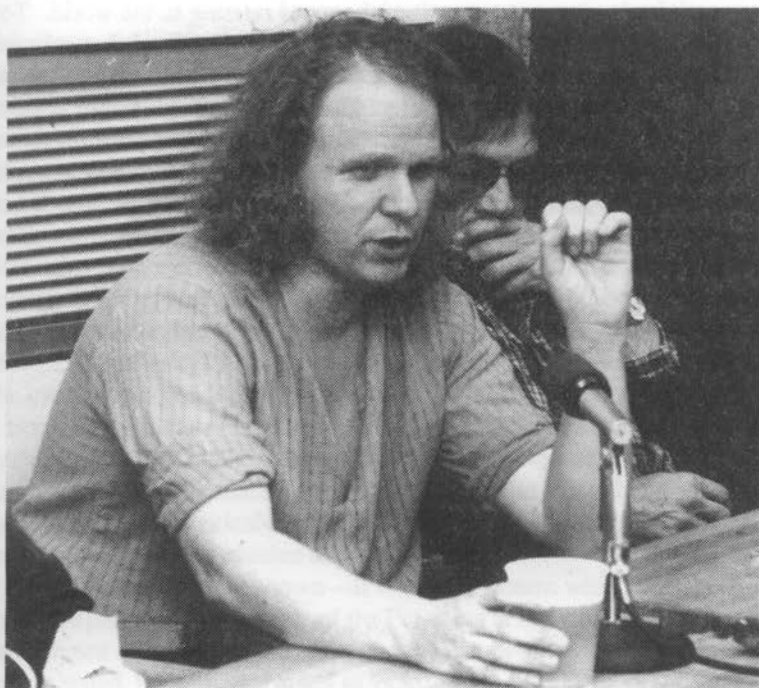


photo courtesy of University News Service

* * *

RM: bp, how does technique relate to your sense of contemporary poetics? What's the larger meaning of the concern with the writing act, the placement of words on the page, and how a poem gets composed?

bp: I always liked what Philip Whalen wrote years ago in *New American Poetry*, that his work was a "graph of his mind moving." Well, when I'm talking about this thing of facility, of craft in the old sense, it seems to me you're talking about a connectedness, say a cultural connectedness. Then there's the history of our own writing, the history of the writers we have learned from, and the wider, broader history of writing. And there's that nice theoretical concept, all literature, which is something none of us could ever read.

Once you begin to realize all that, nonetheless, here you are in your writing, and writing, I think it's fair to say for all three of us, is the most meaningful activity. So in a way you have this bizarre relationship to the world—a rather solitary activity is your most meaningful way of relating to the world. To me, therefore, it seems a responsibility. A personal moral stance I then take on is to expand my technical range, my range of what is possible in my craft, to know that I don't write a certain way because I choose not to, not because I can't. It's very easy to dismiss a certain way of writing, but the fact is, you couldn't write that way to save your soul. I mean, if God promised you wouldn't go to Hell if you couldn't do it. So it seems to me that you're engaged in the very human activity of trying, in the vocation you have chosen, to relate to existence—to try to do that in the best way that is absolutely possible.

GB: Or as Gertrude Stein said, If you can do it, why do it?

MAXIMUS AT THE GATES: THE AMBIVALENT NATURE OF THE MOTHER-CITY

In "Maximus, from Dogtown—I" Olson, through the contest and transfiguration of James Merry, an historical resident of Dogtown, indicated the new direction the second volume of the *Maximus Poems* would take—away from the social concerns of Gloucester, Massachusetts, with its complex political and economic history, and toward an examination of the individual psyche. The shift from the port of Gloucester to the now deserted inland village of Dogtown signalled an increasing interest in the metaphorical nature of place, and of the poet's problematical relation to this spiritual aspect of his locale. The defeat of Maximus, as Merry, on his own ground symbolizes the difficulty Olson himself had taking up residence in this sacred precinct where primal gods—and not politicians—hold sway. Merry's tragic battle with the bull-calf is presided over by the intemperate goddess of the Mexican Pulque, Mayauel. At stake in this epic struggle is the emergence or suppression of the hero's soul, the clearly individuated ego. In drunken vanity, Merry fails, and the negative elementary character of the Mother continues supreme. It remains, therefore, for Maximus to transcend his metaphorical defeat (the *literal* death of Merry) and to prepare for a renewed attack on the feminine citadel.

In "Maximus, from Dometown—II"¹ and the poems which closely follow it, the negative elementary character of the Feminine is more narrowly delineated by the archetypes of the *witch*, the *siren* and the *femme-fatale*. Though it is not expressly stated, these figures stand as guardians to the hidden or secret City which lies 'under' Dogtown, the Mother-City (or *metro-polis*) to which Maximus is magnetically drawn. There is to be found the "Black Gold Flower," the "Padma" or lotus of Creation—a prize loosely equated with the golden fleece sought by Jason and his Argonauts. Medea's ambivalent role as both helper and destroyer is early alluded to when she is introduced as "a Phoenician / wench ... Daughter // of the Terror." Here, it is to her aspect as Hecate, Moon-Witch, that Olson refers, for although she aids Jason and the Argonauts in their rescuing of the sacred golden fleece from the garden of Ares in Aea, she becomes associated in our minds with the "loathsome and immortal dragon of a thousand coils ... born from the blood of the monster Typhon,"² who guards it and whom Medea

subdues with magic incantations and “soporific drops” (*GM2*, 238). On their return voyage, Medea performs other remarkable feats, but her greatest act of calumny is reserved for Pelias who had unlawfully usurped the Iolcan throne from Jason’s father, and contrived to send Jason on his impossible mission in the hope that he would not return; during Jason’s absence Pelias killed his parents and younger brother. Medea undertakes to revenge Jason’s losses by treachery; disguised as a crone of Artemis, she arrives in Iolcus proclaiming that Artemis had appeared “in a chariot drawn by flying serpents” and promised “good fortune” (*GM2*, 251) for the Iolcans. Frightened by this crone and her attendants dressed up as Maenads “raging through the streets,” Pelias “enquires in terror what the goddess require[s] of him” (*GM2*, 251). Medea tells him that Artemis is about to reward his piety with new youth, and convinces Pelias that she can rejuvenate him if he will allow himself to be ritually cut to pieces and cooked in her magic cauldron. Ironically, it is two of his daughters who perform the ritual, only to discover afterwards that they have committed patricide. In a footnote, Graves associates Artemis’s chariot with Medea’s: “Medea’s serpent-drawn chariot—serpents are underworld creatures—had wings because she was both earth-goddess and moon-goddess. She appears in triad here as Persephone-Demeter-Hecate: the three daughters of Pelias dismembering their father” (*GM2*, 253). Why Olson calls Medea a “Phoenician / wench” is unclear. Graves shows her to be the daughter of King Aetes’s “first wife, the Caucasian nymph Asterodeia” (*GM2*, 237) whose name Graves glosses as “goddess of the sun” (*GM2*, 383). Medea was born in Colchis on the east coast of the Black Sea. As an Anatolian priestess of the Moon-goddess, she is possibly a relative of the Levantine Great Mother, Anath or Astarte, whom Olson may have had in mind. Olson connects Caucasian, Phoenician and North American “time” together a few stanzas later; the “Black Sea time” he there mentions would seem to be a reference to Aea, the land surrounding Colchis, or possibly the whole of Anatolia, about 1200 B.C.

Maximus’s peculiar remark, “(if Medea // kills herself ...” is also at odds with mythology, where she is last seen flying back to Colchis in her serpent-drawn chariot. Furthermore, she does not die, but becomes immortal, reigning in the Elysian Fields (*GM2*, 257). The highly conditional “if” suggests that Maximus, as Jason, might emerge triumphant from his confrontation with this daughter of terror, the negative anima, if only she would kill herself. Later in the same poem, “she-who-Lusted After-the / Snake-in-the-Pond,” a similar archetype of the femme-fatale figure drawn from Algonquin legend, is mentioned, but remains undeveloped until a later poem, beginning “Of old times there was a very beautiful / woman... .” (*MII*, 21). Thereafter, she resurfaces several more times as a reminder that she will not be repressed.

In “Maximus, / to himself, / as of ‘Phoenicians’:” (*MII*, 11) we encounter the similar but contemporary figure of Mei-Ling, Lady Chiang Kai-shek, of

China and Taiwan, who had earlier appeared in an essentially political context in "Tyrian Businesses" where Olson called her "that international doll"³ who demands silk sheets when she's put up in the White House. There, as here, she calls herself Luck, and is symbolized by the swastika,⁴ with its ambivalent modern connotation. In "Phoenicians" Olson contrasts this notion of a dangerous and capricious Goddess of Fortune with the Padma, the Black Chrysanthemum, which is everpresent, but out of reach. This black-gold flower, which also represents the spiritual sun within the individual—in contrast with the feminine Moon—is eternal, but difficult to more than glimpse.

In the next poem, "For 'Moirá'" (MII, 12), Olson mentions two aspects of Greek Fate, or Necessity: Moira, who was familiar to the Greeks of classical times, and Heimarmene, a product of the 3rd Century gnostics. According to Jung, who quotes the gnostic, Zosimos, in *Psychology and Alchemy*, one object of gnosticism was to "draw the soul forth from the dominion of Heimarmene into the realm of the incorporeal..."⁵ One is again reminded of the popular Roman goddess, Fortuna, who includes the ideas of fate, luck, and necessity. Heimarmene, however, is not looked upon as favourable, but rather as cold and uncompromising, fate without mercy; "those that have only bodily hearing are slaves of Heimarmene, for they neither understand nor admit anything else" (PA, 368). In an emotional outburst, Olson rejects this unrelenting and coldly abstract image of Fate, and replaces her with "the / warmth of Moira." The poem opens:

TO HELL WITH, like
—& UP heimarmene ... (MII, 12)

as though it were possible to rid oneself of the negative elementary character of the Mother by a simple gesture.

Olson may not have owned a copy of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*—no copy was found in his library after death—yet it is hard to believe he was unfamiliar with this classic, a popular translation of which was made by Robert Graves whose writings in mythology Olson much admired (he owned several editions of *The White Goddess*, for instance). While the immediate source for this poem is Jung's *Symbols of Transformation*, as Butterick has pointed out,⁶ I think it is safe to assume that he knew the story in greater detail than the psychologist gives in his brief account.

Apuleius is the somewhat comic hero of his own tale, and not unlike Maximus, is on a journey through life's experience toward the discovery of his true, or full, self. Apuleius, we remember, through *ill luck*, has been transformed into an ass, the animal which to Isis is, beyond all others, "the most hateful beast in the universe."⁷ In contrast to this ill luck, Isis, out of kindness, offers to metamorphose Apuleius back into his original shape if he will

henceforth devote himself to her service. The symbolism is obvious: Apuleius can transcend his hateful bestiality only in the service of, or through devotion to, the Goddess. Moreover, he has not forgotten that all his ill luck was brought about by his belief in "bad luck" or "blind fortune" which, the High Priest of Isis now informs him, "has no power to hurt those who devote their lives to the honour and service of our Goddess's majesty."⁸ Similarly, in Jung's *Symbols of Transformation*, the ruthlessness of Heimarmene is mitigated by the benevolent influence of Isis who represents "that fortune which is not blind, but can see."⁹ Jung's footnote occurs in the context of a discussion of the early years of the Christian brotherhood when it was realized that libidinal impulses must be replaced by a "higher form of social intercourse symbolized by a projected ('incarnate') idea (the Logos)..."¹⁰ Interestingly, Olson does not take up this positive theme of the Logos, which is related to the archetype of the Father, nor the theme of brotherly love, but concentrates on the problem presented by the various aspects of the feminine archetype and the resolution offered to Apuleius by Isis, also derived from Jung's note:

The speech of the high priest of Isis (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, XI, 15) reveals a similar train of thought. The young philosopher Lucius was changed into an ass, that ever-rutting animal hateful to Isis. Later he was released from the spell and initiated into the mysteries. During his disenchantment, the priest says: "On the slippery path of your lusty youth you fell a prey to servile pleasures, and won a sinister reward for your ill-fated curiosity... . But hostile fortune has no power over those who have devoted their lives to serve the honour and majesty of our goddess... . Now, you are safe, and under the protection of that fortune which is not blind, but can see." In his prayer to Isis, Queen of Heaven, Lucius says (XI, 25): "... thy saving hand, wherewith thou unweavest even the inextricably tangled web of fate, and assaugest the tempests of fortune, and restrainest the baleful orbits of the stars." Altogether, the purpose of the mysteries of Isis was to break the "compulsion of the stars" [i.e., of Heimarmene] by magic power.

The power of fate makes itself felt unpleasantly only when everything goes against our will, that is to say, when we are no longer in harmony with ourselves. The ancients, accordingly, brought εἰμαρμενη into relation with the "primal light" or "primal fire," the Stoic conception of the ultimate cause, or all-pervading warmth which produced everything and is therefore fate...¹¹

Olson's rejection of the cold hand of fate (heimarmene) and his preference for "the / warmth of Moira" indicates a passive desire to be uplifted by the hands of Isis, the beneficent Mother. His admission that he should "get up off the ass,"

while of course a pun on the donkey into which Apuleius has been turned, more importantly indicates the torpor into which the poet feels he has fallen, the inability to get up and do something about his condition. If the poem is properly in keeping with its source in Jung, the implication is that the poet has fallen into a state of lustfulness and sensuality, a condition which Jung is at some pains to point out utterly prevents meaningful sublimation. All spiritual goals, creativity, and the process of individuation depend on the willful sacrifice of the libidinous ego in favour of a higher cause. What is lacking—in the poem, as well as in the poet—is that “primal fire” which symbolizes the energy, both personal and universal, which might bring about the harmony desired. The “all-pervading warmth” of Moira and the beneficent “hand of Isis” cannot be had simply through desire.¹² The poem succeeds only in its capacity to chart the poet’s condition, and to indicate the two directions in which he is drawn. In this way it is very unlike Apuleius’s account, in which a personal salvation is actually achieved. Maximus is not mentioned in the poem, nor is his *imago* very much further defined.

The significance of this poem lies in Olson’s recognition that the dipolar aspects of the feminine can, and perhaps must, exist side by side; while at the same time it is possible to align one’s will and actions with either, and so improve or retard one’s psychic progress.

In “Maximus further on (December 18th 1959)” (*MII*, 13) the siren imagery recurs, and several particulars here suggest that Olson is intentionally portraying an archetypal circumstance wherein the hero, like Perseus, must accomplish a difficult feat in order to free his Andromeda from her cruel and unjust bondage to the rocks. Andromeda’s parents had sacrificed her to propitiate Poseidon who had “sent a flood and a female sea-monster to devastate Philistia.”¹³ “On condition that, if he rescued her, she should be his wife and return to Greece with him, Perseus took to the air” (*GMI*, 240) with his magic sandals and helmet of invisibility, “grasped his sickle and, diving murderously from above, beheaded the approaching monster, which was deceived by his shadow on the sea” (*GMI*, 240).

From a psychological point of view, both sea-monster and Andromeda, the naked damsel, represent the extremes of the Anima; and Graves in an illuminating footnote links this myth with others which substantiate its fundamental, or archetypal, quality.

Andromeda’s story has probably been deduced from a Palestinian icon of the Sun-god Marduk, or his predecessor Bel, mounted on his white horse and killing the sea-monster Tiamat. This myth also formed part of Hebrew mythology: Isaiah mentions that Jehovah (Marduk) hacked Rahab in pieces with a sword (*Isaiah* li:9); and according to *Job* x:13 and xxvi:12, Rahab was the Sea. In the same icon, the jewelled,

naked Andromeda, standing chained to a rock, is Aphrodite, or Ishtar, or Astarte, the lecherous Sea-goddess, 'ruler of men.' But she is not waiting to be rescued; Marduk has bound her there himself, after killing her emanation, Tiamat the sea-serpent, to prevent further mischief. In the Babylonian Creation Epic, it was she who sent the Flood. Astarte, as Sea-goddess, had temples all along the Palestinian coast, and at Troy she was Hesione, 'Queen of Asia,' whom Heracles is said to have rescued from another sea-monster. (*GM1*, 244 n)

Gen Douglas, her sister, and Olson, have gone swimming off Cressy's and climbed up to sun or rest on "a kelp / ledge," a rock exposed by the low tide. The two girls lying on the rocks remind the poet of several primordial pictures of women, such as the upper paleolithic rock carving of the 'Venus' at Laussel in Dordogne, which Olson probably saw in Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*, plate 2. Olson further associates their forms, somewhat unflatteringly, with those of two sea mammals, the manatee, which frequents the Caribbean, and the dugong, which is found in the South Pacific; both belong to the Order 'Sirenia,' and were once supposed to have mermaid-like features. Illustrations of both are to be found in *Webster's 2nd*; it is likely that Olson was thinking of the Sirens of the Odyssey, and looking it up, followed on down to the word, Sirenia, where the manatee and dugong are mentioned.

Olson also identifies his Andromeda as an "awash Norn nurse waitress," which connects this poem with the previous one; the vocation of one of the two girls evidently reminds Olson of the Teutonic demigoddess of Fate¹⁴ who, like Moira, more frequently occurs in the plural.

The spectacle of Gen Douglas and her friend set up a multitude of mythological and psychological associations which pull in two directions, evoking either the negative elementary character in the figures of the Siren, the Venus of Laussel, the sea-mammals or sea-monster or the destructive Fates—all of which may be subsumed by Graves's Tiamat; or the positive Anima, represented by Andromeda and the kindlier fates made soft by the terms "nurse" and "waitress." The poem is a transitional one, and Olson is unable to resolve the tensions created by the disparate feminine archetypes, though, as the last line clearly indicates, he would very much like to be able to play the hero to Andromeda: "the Impossible Rock Perseus the Husband not me," he laments, perhaps thinking of the Greek hero's superhuman advantages. Speaking in this connection in *The Origin and History of Consciousness*, Erich Neumann writes, "The experience of the captive and helper (our Andromeda and Perseus) marks out, within the threatening, monstrous world of the unconscious presided over by the Mothers, a quiet space where the soul, the anima, can take shape as the feminine counterpart of the hero, and as the complement to his ego consciousness."¹⁵ Olson was no doubt painfully aware that he could not, at this

point, redeem his princess, and Neumann further stipulates that failure of the hero to rescue and then unite with his captive Soul clearly indicates that something is amiss, that the "lack of feminine relationship is compensated by an excessively strong unconscious tie to the Great Mother. The nonliberation of the captive expresses itself in the continued dominance of the Great Mother under her deadly aspect, and the final result is alienation from the body and from the earth, hatred of life, and world negation."¹⁶ Such complete despair is not evidenced in the poem, but the Mothers are certainly in control. When Olson contrasts himself with Perseus, we must remember that the Greek hero's most powerful weapon (which he keeps in reserve in our rendition of the story) is the terrifying head of the gorgon, Medusa, whom he had earlier slain. According to Neumann again, this act implies that Perseus has overcome the suffocatingly destructive and petrifying power of the Terrible Mother, and has even learned to turn this power to his own advantage in overcoming further obstacles. "What the hero kills is only the terrible side of the female, and this he does in order to set free the fruitful and joyous side with which she joins herself to him."¹⁷ In the Perseus myth, this "fruitful and joyous" aspect is represented by Andromeda.

With this in mind, we can now look back to "Maximus, from Dogtown—II" where the poet consciously turns his "Back on / the Sea" to "go inland, to / Dogtown" (*MII*, 9) and away from the harbor of Gloucester which is now corrupt.¹⁸ Psychologically, this also indicates a turning from the impossibly oppressive Tiamat-Mother, to a new idea of Polis, a city of the Imagination. Olson aligns himself with the heroic "sons / who refused to be Denied / the Demon" (*MII*, 9) when he accepts the terrifying presence of Medea; by facing the negative anima (albeit with averted eyes) he begins the slow process of attaining self-hood. Olson mixes biographical and mythical material when he characterizes himself in the poem as his mother's son, rather than his father's: "as J-son / Johnson Hines / son Hines // sight."¹⁹ The pun on Jason, leader of the Argonauts, whose name meant "healer," slights the poet's meagre connexion; the second pun, on "hindsight," suggests a drawing backward into the genetic matrix, which weakens the hero's necessarily superior nature.

(Mythologically, the hero invariably transcends his personal parents, and it is obvious that Olson wants Maximus to achieve this metaphysical status.)

Later in the poem, Olson completes this concept of the hero in relation to the Mother in a confusing, but nonetheless extraordinary, abridgement of a Coptic Treatise on Gnosticism found in Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*. Olson writes:

there is One!
One Mother
One Son

One Daughter
and Each the Father
of Him-Her-Self:

the Genetic
is Ma the Morphic
is Pa the City is Mother—

Polis, the Child-Made-Man-Woman is

...

Man) MONOGENE
(*MII*, 9-10)

The Gnostic viewpoint expressed the belief that everything issues from one source, the Son of God—even the Mother, who is referred to as the “Monad” and pictured diversely as a “ship,” a “field,” and a “City,” all terms which would naturally appeal to Olson. Jung quotes the passage in support of his argument that the centre of a circle psychologically represents the “self as the summation of the total personality” (*PA*, 106) and at the same time, provides a “very well known allegory of the nature of God” (*PA*, 106-7). The passage is seminal to our understanding of Olson’s idea of Maximus as “Son,” and to his new found image of the City as a spiritual place.

The *Monogenes* precedes, and yet mystically dwells like a spark of light within its worldly manifestation which is called the Monad. From this *Monogenes*,

... it is the Monad come, in the manner of a ship, laden with all good things, and in the manner of a field, filled or planted with every kind of tree, and in the manner of a city, filled with all races of mankind... .
(*PA*, 107)

The particular Monad of the City is then described as having twelve gates and a crown of twelve “Monads” (probably the jewels of a diadem) and a veil which represents its towers of defence. “This same,” we are told, “is the Mother-City” *μητροπόλις* of the Only-begotten *μονογενής* (*PA*, 107). Jung’s commentary on the Gnostic passage influenced Olson as much or more than the treatise itself, and throws considerable light on not only this poem, but also several others, not least the posthumously published “The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum,”²⁰ his last piece of writing. Jung comments as follows:

As 'metropolis' ... the Monad is feminine, like the *padma* or lotus, the basic form of the Lamaic mandala (the Golden Flower in China and the Rose or Golden Flower in the West). The Son of God, God made manifest, dwells in the flower. (PA, 107-108)

Ultimately, Jung points out, "The Monad is a spark of light (Spinther) and an image of the Father, identical with the Monogenes" (PA, 109). As such, the creator is invoked as both "'the House and the Dweller in the House'" (PA, 109).

Thus, when Olson writes, "The Genetic / is Ma the Morphic / is Pa ..." (MII, 9), we recognize that he means Maximus must sit in the heart of Dogtown, like the jewel in the lotus, the Creator within his "House." The Algonquin figure, "with-the-House-on-his-Head" (MII, 9), who appears but briefly in this poem but who will be filled out later in "Maximus Letter # whatever" (MII, 31), is a further example of this mystical indweller. The importance of this masculine concept of the Morphic is that it identifies the creative activity of the poet with the Creator Father, who will be variously represented in subsequent poems as Zeus, Ptah, etc., while at the same time providing an image of self-fulfillment. Similarly, as Olson turns his "Back on / the Sea" to "go inland, to / Dogtown" he discovers a metaphysic for rendering the raw geological landscape of Cape Ann and the politically corrupt city of Gloucester into a city of the Imagination. This is further symbolized by the numerous references to "soft coal" which provides the chemical basis for the perfect "Diamond"; the metaphysical alchemy of this transformation makes up a large part of the poem, as well.

In "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]" MII, 14), Olson once again combines biographical and geographical information and discusses the problem of rendering his environmental facts into poetic truth. This often anthropologized poem opens, "I come back to the geography of it," which immediately establishes that he is *returning* to first memories of summers spent in Gloucester with his parents, both of whom figure largely in the poem. His earliest memory, he tells us, is of the humorous, but mythical incident in which his father, "a man for kicks, came out of the tent roaring / with a bread-knife in his teeth to take care of / a druggist they'd told him had made a pass at / my mother, she laughing, so sure, as round / as her face, Hines pink and apple, / under one of those frame hats women then [wore]" (MII, 14).²¹ There was little doubt that Olson's *father*, at least in jest, could play the role of the champion with *his* apple-cheeked damsel. In the much more abstract passage which follows the above episode, Olson insists that such concrete memories of events in early childhood are equally what lend form and meaning to his life now ("the generation of those facts / which are my words") and give the poet his particular shape within the poem. Roughly, all of this memory, coupled with the omnipresent geography which "forever ... leans in / on me," comprises the

"genetic," the uncut rock which we have identified with the overpowering Mother.²² But in this poem, with an unequalled eloquence, the poet strikes back at the seemingly insurmountable force of Mother Earth, when he retaliates with:

I compell
backwards I compell Gloucester
to yield, to [Maximus, to]
change
Polis
is this

The City, which is identified with the Mother, must yield to the son, Maximus, who alone has the power to transform the "welter" of "novel," "incoming" "forms" and "events," because only the poet possesses sufficient knowledge of the Whiteheadian process of "negative prehension," whereby it is possible to receive vast amounts of stimuli, but automatically dissociate oneself from those which are irrelevant. As Whitehead points out, everyone practices "negative prehension" for sheer survival; but Olson, as the poet of his city, takes it upon himself to achieve greater than average discrimination.²³

Just as Olson is forced to "come back to the *geography*" of Gloucester and Cape Ann, so he is compelled to force back the literal landscape and produce a geometry of the modern American's soul. As the poet learns to "discriminate his body" and to become, proprioceptively, "one / with his skin," his inner Self becomes free to take up residence within the metaphysical landscape which, ultimately, the "Polis" is.

NOTES

1. Charles Olson, "Maximus, from Dogtown—II," *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI [Maximus II]* (London, 1968), pp. 9-10; hereafter abbreviated MII.

2. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2 (Penguin Books, 1981), p. 238; hereafter abbreviated GM2.

3. Charles Olson, "Tyrian Businesses," *The Maximus Poems [Maximus I]* (London, 1960), p. 35.

4. *Webster's 2nd International Dictionary* defines swastika as a "sign of good luck or benediction" and gives the synonyms *fylfot* and *cammadion*. Its

etymology is from the sanskrit *svastika*, from *svasti* welfare, from *sa* well + *asti* being. It is found in many Asian, European and American cultures. See *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed., unabridged (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 25.

5. C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 2nd ed., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 12 (New York, 1968), pp. 360-361; hereafter abbreviated PA.

6. George Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 260-261.

7. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 272.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

9. C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, vol. 1 (New York, 1962), p. 67n.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 67n.

12. In the introduction to his translation of *The Golden Ass*, Graves comments: "In Apuleius's day the ass typified lust, cruelty and wickedness ..." (p. 13). Some time after Apuleius has been turned into an ass and suffered considerable misfortune, it is Isis who presents herself to him to explain that his retransformation into human form depends on his promising to remain dedicated to her service (p. 272). It should be noted that her appearance is an act of grace; it is not brought about by the willfulness of the malcontent.

13. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1 (Penguin Books, 1981), p. 240; hereafter abbreviated GMI.

14. Generally, the *Moirae*, like the Norns, are three in number, and generally cover the past, present and future of both man's and gods' destinies. The Greek Fates are: "*Clotho* (the Spinner), who spins the thread of life, *Lachesis* (Disposer of Lots), who determines its length, and *Atropos* (Inevitable), who cuts it off. (Oskar Seyffert, *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities* [Cleveland, 1956], p. 398.) *Webster's 2nd* points out that originally "there appears to have been but one Norn, called by the Anglo-Saxons *Wyrd* and by the Norse *Urth*, and

her character was conceived in a gloomy light, making her name often equivalent to death doom (cf. HEL). Later two others were added making the Norse trio *Urth*, *Verthandi*, and *Skuld*, or Past, Present, and Future, in England represented by the Weird Sisters of Macbeth. Two give the blessings, the third the ills, of life." (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed., unabridged (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 1665).

15. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, vol. 1 (New York, 1962), p. 203.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

18. See also "Letter, May 1, 1959" in *Maximus I*, p. 149ff, where the poet writes: "The sea / is east The choice Our backs / turned from the sea but the smell // as the minister said / in our noses / I am interfused / with the rubbish // of creation ..."; and in the same poem: "step off / onto the nation The sea / will rush over ...," and "start all over step off the / Orontes onto land no Typhon / no understanding of a cave / a mystery Cashes? ..." The Orontes, a river in western Syria, runs into the Mediterranean north of Tyre near Kadesh where Zeus fought with Typhon. The river is also known as "Typhon." Cf. also, "Letter #41 broken off," the opening poem of *MII*, p. 9.

19. Olson's mother was Mary Hines, daughter of John Hines (1846-1918) who came from Ireland to the United States some time before 1872. See "The Grandfather-Father Poem" in *Archaeologist of Morning* (London, 1970), p. 216; Butterick, *Guide*, p. 251.

20. Published in *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives*, III (Spring 1975), pp. 64-74, and Butterick's note, p. 75.

21. *MII*, p. 14. For the clarity it offers, I have restored this poem to the form in which it first appeared in the *Yale Literary Magazine*, CXXXI, Nos. 3-4 (April 1953), 45-46. It was this version Olson read in Vancouver in the summer of 1963 before *MII* was published. The restorations give a better indication of what Olson was doing with the figure of Maximus, and help to clarify the syntax. I do not consider the final version an improvement over the earlier draft, with the exception of "occasions" which appeared in the singular in the Yale version where it makes poor sense.