

22. C. Kerényi, in C.G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York, 1963) p. 51, points out that for “the Greeks the rocky landscape symbolized ... the uttermost beginning of things ..., the world of the Mother—the maternal world.” As such it represents the unformed, incomplete world of the womb.

23. See A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York, 1960), p. 35, where the philosopher postulates “two species of prehensions: (a) ‘Positive prehensions’ which are termed ‘feelings,’ and (b) ‘negative prehensions’ which are said to ‘eliminate from feeling.’” Or again, on p. 66, “An actual entity has a perfectly definite bond with each item in the universe. This determinate bond is its prehension of that item. A negative prehension is the definite exclusion of that item from positive contribution to the subject’s own real internal constitution.” In section III, “The Theory of Prehension,” Whitehead continues his discussion of this subject; Olson’s “Letter 27,” and indeed much of his theory, is indebted to this section of Whitehead’s book. Even the terms “Genetic” and “Morphological” have their inception here, though not in the more strictly psychological way in which Olson clearly uses them. From Whitehead, also, come the terms “novel,” “event,” “occasion,” “personal order” and the “spatial nature” of events—Whitehead’s “extensive continuum” and “spatialization”: (“The actual entity as described by the morphology of its satisfaction is the actual entity ‘spatialized,’ to use Bergson’s term. The actual entity, thus spatialized, is given individual fact actuated by its own ‘substantial form’” (p. 336).

Once again, a most seminal passage in *Process and Reality* for Olson’s “Letter 27” concerns “negative prehension”; Olson differentiates his method from that of the Greeks who, in contrast to modern “Americans,” did have a “strict personal order / for their inheritance.” A modern, who can not draw upon such genetic data for self definition, must rely solely upon the “complex of occasion[s],” which, if properly prehended and transformed, will yield “a geometry / of spatial nature”—a metaphysical man of his being. On p. 346, under the subheading “The Theory of Feelings,” Whitehead describes first how we determine, by negative prehension, which feelings we will allow in, but then goes on to show how even our negative prehensions leave their “scars” on our being, which Olson refers to as “all those antecedent precessions, the precessions // of me, the generations of those facts” which, though he is not always aware of them, make up his character. They are, of course, biological, cultural and geographical (or environmental). Whitehead writes:

In this process (of experience through discrimination), the negative prehensions which effect the elimination are not merely negligible. The process through which a feeling passes in constituting itself, also

records itself in the subjective form of the integral feeling. The *negative prehensions have their own subjective forms* which they contribute to the process. *A feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth*; it recollects as a subjective emotion its struggle for existence; it *retains the impress of what it might have been, but is not*. It is for this reason that *what an actual entity has avoided* as a datum for feeling *may yet be an important part* of its environment. (Italics mine.)

For Olson, however, as the tension and assertiveness of this poem indicate, such "genetic" feelings "recollected" from childhood and before are fraught with difficult Maternal associations, the "scars" of which are evident here, and throughout, the sequence. Even, and perhaps especially, that which has been "avoided" must now be encountered anew, "compelled backward," and made "to yield" "to Maximus" and "to / change" before the True City, or Polis, can take Form (the Morphic). The poet will go on wrestling with his soul until the problem of the Mother can be solved, or internalized; the image of the Father fully realized (formed); and the two figures alchemically wed. Of course this is an extension of Creeley's reminder that "form is never more than an extension of content" (Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley [New York, 1966], p. 16). That "the Genetic / is Ma" refers to "content" and hints at its biological complexity; Olson also connects this with the idea that "the City is Mother," a pun on the etymology of the Greek *metro-polis*, mother-city. That the "morphic / is Pa" is a straight-forward connection with Creeley's "form," though again Olson is thinking, ultimately, of the Imago of the male self, and its sources in physical and psychological experience.

SIX PLAINTS AND A LAMENT FOR BASIL BUNTING

"When I stop liking tea and cigarettes
I'll send for the undertaker."

Who was this man whose death at 85 is so saddening? Looking back: images, words—

1. *Late 1941. Alloa, Fife:* Bunting, B., Leading Aircraftsman, Serial number 1119305, learning how to drive an army lorry, at the front of a large convoy, spots up ahead an archway, on the left side of the road, on which, as he gets nearer, he can read "George Younger's Brewery." So he leads the whole convoy into the yard. "We all got a free drink," he said. *April 1971. Ontario:* "A sign in Prescott caught my eye ST PAUL ST BILLIARDS. Popular saint, that last." *November 1984. Hexham:* Waiting in a shop to get his watch fixed. "There's a watch that has an eye in it where it shouldn't have." Facing us, a placard promoting ACCURIST. Our slow wits took some time to read "accurst."

Basil Bunting: an attentive and opportunist eye (and ear) with little or no respect for Authority, save that which he chose to recognize for himself. "You cannot be useful and retain possession of your mind,"^{TxU*} he told Zukofsky in 1947—this, when he was in Teheran, being very useful indeed to the British Foreign Office.

* Where Basil Bunting's words quoted here are not from published sources or private collections, permission to print is as follows:

1. CtY: letters to Ezra Pound, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University;
2. InU: letters to Dorothy Pound, Lilly Library, Indiana University;
3. NBuU: letters to Jonathan Williams, Jargon Society Papers, SUNY at Buffalo;
4. TxU: letters to Louis Zukofsky, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. All quotations from Basil Bunting are copyright 1985 the estate of Basil Bunting.

2. *September 1972. Wylam, Northumberland*: "Did I tell you about the cats? The snake-and-lizard man came to see me, hunting a lizard said to have been seen in Northumberland, where it had no business to be. I mentioned casually the wild cats (*Felix Sylvestris*) now plentiful in the border forests. He got enormously excited, got on his motor-bicycle and rushed off to the forest, where he found three wild cats in a single evening. Apparently none of the farmers or forestry people had ever thought of mentioning wild cats to the naturalists, so it was news to *Nature*, which ran an article, and to the BBC's natural history section. They asked Simms *who* was an expert on wildcats, and the damn man said I was; so for a week the BBC was ringing me everyday, trying to get me to admit that I knew all about wild cats. Now I had never even seen one loose, only heard about them in the pubs near the forests. They wouldn't believe me. At last I choked them off (their photographers got a good picture of one eating a pheasant), and went out for a ride, which took me into the forest. Coming down a very narrow remote lane I stopped to examine a hedgehog, deciding not to take it home to our garden because the dog and two cats would have gone mad trying to bite it, and just as I was about to get in to the car again I saw a wild cat, stalking a couple of young rabbits. It was unmistakably the wild creature, heavier on the haunch than the domestic cat, and with a head smaller in proportion to the body. So that was that." *The late 1950's. Throckley and then Wylam*: Working 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. for *The Newcastle Daily Journal*, cycling back and forth from home to Newcastle, getting to bed perhaps by 3:30, sometimes not till 4 or later, obliged (to keep his job) to "remain an 'expert' on foreign affairs" by reading "very fully" the foreign despatches in the *Times* and the *Telegraph* and other papers for two or three hours after he got up and before he went to work, long long days, cycling in the "tolerable" autumn night and in the winter, often struggling against a gale, stupid with fatigue, "tired of fools," hating it. But at Corn Close, nearly thirty years later, he told Jonathan Williams (and a BBC crew): "That was worth doing. In the middle of the night you saw all sorts of creatures on that road that you never see in the daytime. Every kind of owl I got familiar with, and foxes carrying chickens in their mouths, and things of that sort. It was very nice in some ways, of course you were terribly tired, a tiring business being up all night working on a newspaper and then trying to sleep when everyone else is up and about in the day."

A love of animals and wildlife; a hatred of pomposity; a mischievous eye.

3. *September 1973. Connemara*: "I had a conversation with three donkeys. They were wandering along a road, where I was taking a morning stroll. I patted the first that reached me, whereupon it instantly laid its head in my bosom, while its mates joined it. One donkey isnt too hard to manage, but three, all trying to eat your jacket at the same time, are a handful. A tourist car arrived and couldnt get past. The man honked awhile, then stuck his head out of the

window and bawled: "Take your bloody asses out of my way!", so I let on to be a bit stupider than I am, and held him up quite a while." *April 1973. Wylam:* "Columbia Broadcasting did a film of me in December... I rashly took them to Blanchland for lunch, and they'd never seen anything like that before, so I was kept reading poetry and walking about in icy winds on the fells near the top of Bolt Law for three days... There was some fun. When I was feeling fed up I warned them that the place swarmed with vipers, and enjoyed watching them step delicately around, examining every tuft of heather before gingerly putting their feet down."

A ready glee, often, at the back of those alert and curious eyes, forever alive with mischief and with sheer delight at human oddity. Telling a story, reading a poem, the brown eyes glance back and forth among his listeners; smiling and chuckling to himself, stroking his beard, smoothing the hair behind his ears, dragging on his cigarette.

4. *June 1949. Teheran:* "A friend of mine—another Ezra—was returning from my house to the city in a small open car, when he was hailed by an Arab crying 'Stop.' He didn't stop, whereupon the Arab began to abuse him thoroughly in his own language. As it happens, Ezra is bi-lingual in Arabic and Persian, so he stopped the car, beckoned the Arab over, and hit him on the head with the handle of the jack. A police car which was passing took both of them to the police station and before the magistrate. The magistrate asked: 'Why did you hit this man on the head with the handle of a jack?'

Ezra said: 'Because he abused me.'

The magistrate asked: 'What did he say?'

Ezra told him. The magistrate turned to the Arab and asked: 'If someone said this to you in Baghdad what would you do?'

The Arab said: 'I would rip up his belly.'

The magistrate gave sentence: 'I cannot let you off. You were seen to hit this man over the head with the handle of a jack, so I fine you the minimum, five tumans. If you care to pay twenty tumans you may hit him over the head with the jack itself.' In *September 1972. Wylam:* "One day I stopped at the Farmer's Arms in Muker, in Swaledale, for a sandwich. I ordered two, one beef, one cheese. I'd forgotten I was in Yorkshire, where people really eat, and the sandwiches were enormous by English standards (You wouldn't gasp at them in North America). The girl brought them in and set them down and went off to the kitchen again. Within a minute a man came in, went to the bar and ordered two sandwiches, one beef, one cheese. The barman hollered out to the kitchen: 'Another beef and another cheese, quick,' and there came back the most astonished voice I have ever heard saying: 'What! Has he eaten them *already!*'"

Human absurdity. He hated the city, all his life. In 1938 he talked of "the foulness of town life,"^{TXU} and thirty years later complained in an interview that cities "cut you off from trees, wild life—all the things you ultimately rely on."

Yet he liked Los Angeles, and Isfahan; when he lived in London in the twenties and thirties, sporadic as that domicile may have been, he found great interest and even delight in the indigenous working class population, in what he called "the common people"; he knew a great deal about music halls and popular entertainment, and wrote at least one fine essay on "Folk-Song in London." What he despised was "suburban cleanliness" and "cultured minds," preferring "peasant comfort" to "middleclass convenience." He went for life and vigour in a place, not its respectability. When in 1957 he moved from Throckley to Wylam he was pleased by the closeness of animal life, and his great delight in the company of children was a delight in their unabashed and vigorous curiosity. On 8 August 1972 he reported, on his return from an appallingly wretched year in Victoria, that "little children in the next houses have taken to ringing the bell: 'Please can Mr. Bunting come and play with us?'" In London in 1928 he noticed that "the chief singers are the children," and when in 1977 he moved to Washington, Tyne and Wear, his great tolerance of and patience with children extended to, embraced, and delighted in children of three shouting "fuck off!" or "kick the dog in the balls!" In Washington he lived in a bare and ugly row house in a cramped jungle of concrete-block and brick boxes in dead-end curving streets where by car it is a mile or even two to a neighbour's house less than fifty yards along the footpath; impossible to police; crammed with unemployed (like many another "new town"); hundreds of snotty-nosed kids running round with nothing to do and nowhere to play except scruffy minute patches of grass, or the dead-end street.

5. August 1977. *Washington, Tyne and Wear*: "Children alone make the place endurable. Four or five boys last night who had made their bicycles horses to drag home-made chariots racing round our nearest spot of green at a great pace, in defiance, apparently, of the police, who do not notice that if they prohibit such an entirely harmless infringement of the laws there'd be nothing left for the boys to do but break street lamps, telephone kiosks and people's cars. They got on fine with me, made me Emperor to start the races. Or two little boys and a little girl so loquacious that she kept me sitting $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour on my doorstep without ever closing her lips for ten consecutive seconds, telling me about a deceased goldfish."^{NBU}

Patience and common sense; delight in spontaneity and contempt of hypocrisy. Practical. A kind of astonished amazement at stupidity; a ready dismissal of fools; thorough impatience with the smug. If he hated cities, he hated petty officials of all sorts, but civil servants ("desk and pen vermin")^{TxU} even more—and pedants. Proof-reading a University journal in a printer's shop in the early fifties "enormously increased my regard for soldiers and politicians, not usually thought of as very intelligent or scrupulous classes, but less dishonest and less fatuous than academics."^{TxU} He called himself (with Edgell Rickword) the last of the Victorians; he preferred the small and delicate to the

large-scale and grandiose: the delicacy of Persian to the colossal aggressiveness of Roman and Egyptian architecture, the clarity of Dowland and Byrd to the weight of Wagner or of Beethoven's symphonies, the music of Wyatt to the bombast of Shakespeare; he held the autonomous family as a unit before the village before the town before the city before the state and said that the bigger the autonomous unit gets the worse it is for everybody. The only hope for our children, he thought, was to destroy uniformity, centralisation, big factories, big states and big cities. "I like the common eye," he told Pound in 1954, "cleared maybe, and very sharp, much better than the inward one or the lens-aided dissecting eye."^{CtY} He said our morals need enlarging, and did not believe that man's highest aim is his physical comfort or even his physical sufficiency.

August 1948. Teheran: "The most upright, religious, even saintly, man I ever met after regaling me [in India] with utterly uneatable dishes of mixed peppers decided to entertain me the remainder of the night by taking me to a series of brothels. To revisit Pompei AFTER seeing something of India throws a light on the ancient world that one isn't given at school... . All this is shocking and therefore must not be mentioned or seen. But unless we stop being shocked and receive these things as part of human nature, and by no means an ignoble or uncivilised part, where the hell are we going to get to? Only to new, self-erected blank walls."^{InU} He saw principles, beliefs, theories, abstractions, as so much mumbo-jumbo designed to keep men content with the shoddy, the third- or even twelfth-rate; to keep them subject to an authority not their own. "Prohibition," he told *Contempo* magazine in 1932, "is the most effective red-herring yet invented. It beats even religion for keeping people from thinking about more fundamental structural defects in their society. It beats even baseball." A practical intelligence, forever alert to detail: in 1934 he wondered why slum dwellers (such as those in the Tyne Dock) didn't shoot a few policemen now and then, so their plight might be noticed and attended to, and called the idea that abstract nouns have other than a grammatical significance a "lunatic notion."^{CtY} He kept insisting to Pound that he look at the practical implications of his ideas, told him that "if you start thinking about economics in terms of eats and drinks and sleeps it's liable to be less misleading,"^{CtY} and broke with him in 1938 because, helplessly monotheistic in his intellectual habits, he'd never considered "the implications of polytheism in action"^{CtY} and was probably incapable of doing so. Uncompromising, then; a Northerner. Solid.

6. *March 1934. Tenerife:* "I knew several miner's leaders at one time and another, from checkweighmen to old William Straker (the chap who had found out in the course of fifty years or so of mining politics that billiards was worse than booze). I even talked once or twice to old Charley Fenwick, before he died, a man who had been a Northumberland miner's official since the middle of last century and went down the pit to work at the age of nine. Damn it, I was brought up in all that, Joseph Skipsey is said to have dandled me when I was a

baby, and he'd been down the pit before the first factory acts touched them. I was on the spot when the View Pit was flooded and forty-five men drowned, I heard what the men had to say about it and the whole cursed system when there wasn't any question of politics, mining or otherwise, but just sheer human commonsense. My grandfather, whom I knew pretty well when I was a kid, was a miner, son of a miner. I know the solidity of those people, and I watched it break up in 26, when I was all the time in a mining village, took the chair at one of Cook's meetings, stuck a knife in the tyres of a government strikebreaking lorry and tried unsuccessfully nearly every paper in the country to get the scandalous faked benches of magistrates who condemned the strikers to years of hard labour shown up. Not even the independent labour party's rag would publish the facts."^{CtY} *November 1984. Whitley Chapel*: "One girl, 16, wearing her mother's wedding dress because there was nothing else in the house for her to put on except her factory working clothes. The Bishop of Durham is quite right about the extreme poverty of these people, though no one in the southern newspapers does anything but mock." *1968. Wylam*: "I like to go to museums and look at things people have made: brocades, pots, furniture, durable things. Poems should be durable too. Potters work in space, and poets in time, but the results are much the same. They make something beautiful and lasting."

An insistence on the tangible world, a scrupulous attention to detail. Hence, his edition of Skipsey's poems in 1976: "one small lifelong commitment discharged at last;"^{NBU} a passionate love of the North, and a detailed knowledge of its history. An empiricist, he insisted on the primacy of the sensible world; he was an anarchist "who believes nothing because he can't, not because there are no pleasing or even useful beliefs to choose from;"^{TxU} he rejected all belief which went against the available evidence. Despising journalism for its continual compromise with the truth, loathing it, he was nevertheless (in the words of a *Times* editorial) "scrupulously fair and objective" and one of the great *Times* Correspondents. Attention to detail: whatever else his poetry is, it is flesh and blood: "I like a new landfall," he told Dorothy Pound in 1948; "certain graces of men and trees and hills, the greased leather hides of Zulu girls, the lack of cupidity in remote places and places grown out-of-date, Portuguese sailor's shirts. I like the monkeys to be in the trees, not on chains; bougainvillea; the banyan; the snake-guarded wild bananas in bush you must cut as you go, a life more physical, less logical, less covetous, less distilled out of the past, than the chained life we lead. That's ... why I hate earning a living."^{InU} An anarchist (and a Quaker) he did not believe in causes, disliked Bunyan's prose ("He's alright if you want to *preach*"), did not believe in *raison d'être*, "never felt the need of one. Do exist, anyway."^{CtY} The details he paid attention to were always immediate, always physical and tangible. When he sent Pound his *Collected Poems* in 1968 Pound read them onto a tape, but broke

down—after several false starts—at page 122, “On the Flyleaf of Pound’s Cantos,” and in October 1970, a depressed Ezra Pound wrote him in Vancouver: “If I had paid your attention to detail, I might have done something decent.” A keen eye, a clear sense of priorities, an insistence on clarity of knowledge and of thought. The eye of a poet, the eye of intelligence. A sense of the concrete that serves men well in times of war: “de-briefing,” he told Dorothy Pound, “is taking a pilot’s report and crossexamining him to compare what he actually did on a sortie with what he was instructed to do. In a Fighter Squadron, the Operations Officer and the Intelligence Officer are one and the same man. He receives a rather general order from H.Q. and works out all the implications down to the exact minute of every detail, using not only all the official information he has on file, but also his personal knowledge of his pilots, their capacity & temperament. He then ‘briefs’ everybody concerned—passes on the now exact orders together with every scrap of useful information he can get—where the flak is, what the route looks like, what sort of bloke commands any enemy squadron likely to intercept them, & so on. He checks the planes as they go off, investigates crashes at take-off & reports to H.Q. When the sortie is over, he interviews each pilot separately and compiles an exact narrative of all that took place or was seen. That is the ‘de-briefing,’ which has to be done like lightning and still remain perfectly accurate. It is good mental training: you can almost feel yourself getting shrewder in your estimate of men. I am glad I had a year of it (even though, in action, as we mostly were, you get hardly any sleep or food, being always at work), & I think it probably helped me in surpassing other political intelligence officers and minor diplomats who had not had any similarly strenuous training.”^{InU} The clarity of prose is remarkable, and derives from Hume, Halifax, Swift and Darwin. His favourite novelist was Dickens.

7. December 1971. Vancouver, British Columbia: “The war did me a lot of good: it gave me confidence, assurance in myself as a man of action; it gave me power of decision under great responsibility. It gave me authority: I learned my Wing-Commander-act.” *March and April 1951. Lucca*: “War: ... an activity which has pleasures of its own, an exercise of certain faculties which need exercise: in which death is neither a bugbear nor a consummation but just happens... Freedom from war, like freedom from poverty, can be pursued at the expense of things better worth preserving than peace and plenty, of which, I should say, the most important and the most threatened, is personal autonomy.”^{TxU} *October 1971. Victoria, British Columbia*: “I can say with complete immorality that I enjoyed the war very much. I managed throughout to keep things lively for myself.”

A thorough man; whatever he did, he did completely. A varied war: basic training at RAF Padgate, then June 1940, barrage-balloons, escorting North Sea convoys to Murmansk as Mate on the converted yacht the *Golden Hind* (and getting nearly blown out of the water by a too-near depth charge). 1942, as

interpreter to Persia (via Sierra Leone, Kenya, Natal, India), where he lost some teeth to scurvy. 1943, four weeks in a convoy of eighty lorries, from Baghdad across Arabia Petrea to Tripoli and the battle of Wadi Akarat; the last weeks of the Siege of Malta; an intimate view of the Sicilian campaign from Eisenhower's war-room (which he helped set up) and then from his fighter squadron in Catania (where in the famine he set up a peasants' market and a missing persons' bureau). 1944, Naples (where he was nearly blown up), then by sea to England in time for his squadron to cover the invasion of Normandy. Late 1944 or early 1945, back to Persia, as Squadron Leader, Vice-Consul in Isfahan and then in 1946 to Baghdad as chief of Combined Intelligence for an area which included the whole of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Persia, and others. He found work "a habit-forming vice, like opium"^{TxU} and action "a lust that is hard to abandon."^{InU} He stayed in Persia until the middle of 1946 and went back in February 1947: "I'm afraid I shall want to be moving and at grips with people and outwitting them till I die,"^{InU} he said, and managed, off and on, to stay in Persia—either with British Intelligence and/or as *Times* Correspondent—until 1950 when he lost his job with the *Times*. So the Foreign Office sent him to Italy to stop a Russian takeover but some fool from the embassy met him at the plane and blew his cover: he was shot at a few times (just as, when he went back to Persia for the *Times* in late 1951, Baqai and his thugs would start riots and throw stones at him), but he did what he could, and he made a start on *The Spoils*. A thorough man: under his care the Tribal Map of Persia, the first of its kind outside India, was completed (and is still unpublished, buried in the Foreign Office archives), and detailed histories of oil concessions, of the Qajar dynasty, and of much else besides, were done. He spent, in Persia, all of his Foreign Office allowance, and all of his war-time savings (what little they were) to get the job done—and what was his reward? Mossadeq threw him out of Persia in 1952 (the thugs had done their work), and when he reached England, after driving from Teheran with his pregnant wife and two-year-old daughter (the journey took a month), he could not pay the enormous Duty on what few possessions he had been able to rescue from Mossadeq; the *Times* could not or would not give him a job, and when he got to his mother's house in Throckley he was virtually penniless. "My very considerable services to the state," he told Zukofsky in March 1953, "havent entitled me to anything whatever."^{TxU}

Because he had spent the last few years living outside the country, he did not qualify for unemployment insurance; that same month he told Dorothy Pound that "none of us is entitled to any of the benefits of the welfare state except free medical attention."^{InU} Whenever a potential employer asked him what he'd been doing for the last umpteen years his claims sounded extravagant; if he wanted to write something, what could he write? The Official Secrets Act stopped that. *July 1953. Throckley*: "I cant get a job at seven quid a week (no experience) let alone get listened to. What they mean by experience Lord knows. Last board

that interviewed me simply refused to believe my record. Wouldnt even take the trouble to check up and find it true. 'You mean to say a former GS02 and Counsellor is applying for a piddling little job like this? Make your claims more modest next time.'"CtY June 1953. Throckley: "The government is applying a last turn of the screw, demanding duty and purchase tax on the car the *Times* abandoned to me. I cant pay, I'm not even allowed to sell the car which is running up debts in a garage. But if now they fix a government debt on me I'll end in gaol for having refused to falsify news to the disadvantage of our government. Such is democratic gratitude... my children must starve and I be denied any chance to show sagacity elsewhere. This week we cannot pay the butcher. And little worms who hardly know enough Persian to construe a few pages of the Chahar Maqaleh have lectureships, because they listened to professors nearly as ignorant as themselves, but I who know their literature—and the ways of their tribesmen—I cannot be the slightest use, or at any rate, cannot be paid for it."TxU September 1953. Throckley: "The Air Force expects me to keep my uniform handy for the next war 'to serve in the same position you occupied before demobilisation,' ie, chief of intelligence for a very big region. I wonder, by the way, how many General Staff Officers, Grade Two, are now drawing public assistance?"TxU

Human absurdity, blindness, stupidity. His own damn pride no doubt got in the way, that Victorian or is it Edwardian rectitude, that code of gentlemanly conduct, of not making a fuss, of not airing your linen (clean or dirty) in public. But if he was at all bitter in his later years he had every right to be. Because he had lived so much abroad, he did not qualify for a full old-age pension, which at 65 was pitifully small. So at the Queen's pleasure he was awarded a Civil List pension to make up the difference—but, indexed at a lower rate and taxed at a higher one, it barely paid for his cigarettes. In the middle 1950's Basil Bunting and his family, valued servants of the state, were supported with food parcels sent by Ezra Pound, inmate of St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The British treatment of Basil Bunting is a national disgrace. So in his late sixties and early seventies he underwent a series of voluntary exiles: Santa Barbara, Vancouver, Binghamton, Victoria. July 1971. Wylam: "Can you imagine me teaching poor devils to read Bellow, Styron (who's he?), Cary, to say nothing of Lawrence, Brecht, Beckett, Fitzgerald; or in another course Stevens, Hart Crane, Berryman, Lowell, somebody called O'Hara, Cummings, Duncan? The prospect appals me. If I hadn't dependants I'd never pretend to do it. It makes me quite sick to anticipate it, and the only comfort is that ... I should save enough to live a year or more without working, if the work doesn't kill me first. This syllabus will prevent me being the only real use I can be to the university, which would be to let them know of the existence of David Jones, Zukofsky, MacDiarmid and so on. Even by A-level standards their

syllabus is fifteen years or more out of date. By what I'd reckon of university standards, thirty years." His treatment has been shameful.

And the critics, the professors, and even his publishers—all the people supposed to *know*—have treated him no better. They took too much at face value his too-often-quoted estimate of himself as "minor poet, not conspicuously dishonest," as though self-advertisement was characteristic of all writers. But self-promotion was not part of his stock-in-trade, and he did not elaborate on the meaning of "minor," nor its context. His own stubborn pride, perhaps, forbad any such thing. But in private he would relax, and talk a little. *December 1970. Vancouver*: After reading MacDiarmid aloud, over some beer, in the evening, a list of major writers ("to aim at less is to aim lower") and a list of "secondaries" (Catullus, Chaucer, Sidney, the troubadours, Eliot). The majors? Homer, Ferdosi, Manuchehri, Dante, Wyatt, Spenser, Wordsworth, Whitman, Pound, Yeats, Zukofsky, Jones, MacDiarmid. *August 1953. Throckley*: "I've been thinking ... about how and where I got whatever I know and feel about poetry, and the more I think the bigger Malherbe's part in it seems. Wordsworth, when I was a small kid, showed me what it was; Rossetti's translations from the *Dolce Stil* people, in my teens, and Whitman at the same time, enlarged the scope. Horace gave the first inkling of how it was done (odes). Malherbe produced all I afterwards found in Ez's writing except what I'd already got from Horace. Ez and Spenser, great galleries of technical accomplishment. Lucretius. Dante. And after that, Hafez for what I got from Horace (and Ez from Chinese) only more, taken further: Manuchehri, greater and more splendid gallery than Ez and Spenser: Wyatt: the Mo' Allaqt: and for sheer pleasure, when I am not out to learn or have my mind fixed, for diversion, for sheer living, Homer and Ferdosi." *TxU November 1970. Vancouver*: "'How Duke Valentine Contrived' is not worth keeping; it's got a few good lines but it's an exercise. Its main if not its only virtue is the accuracy of the landscape, of the directions—and that virtue is Machiavelli's. I'm sure when Shelley drowned he thought 'If only I could get my hands on the works. So I could destroy them. They're no good.'"

As a poet Basil Bunting was a progressivist (though he did not believe in progress): each poem he wrote must do something different, that had not been done before. What minor poet of this century—or for that matter, what self-proclaimed or widely-anthologised "major" one—would reject as "better lost" such a poem as "Per Che No Spero" which, capturing so nicely as it does the sound of a dinghy (or, more accurately, a cutter) being slapped by the waves, originally formed the opening lines of a longer and untitled poem, itself destroyed. An old man's casting-up of accounts, that poem ended with a bit of Hadrian's hymn, "anima, blandula, vagula":

Poor soul! Softy, whisperer,
hanger-on, pesterer, sponge!

Where are you off to now?
Pale and stiff and bare-bummed,
It's not much fun in the end.

What *minor* poet, looking through *The Spoils*, would worry: "Is the falcon stuff too commonplace?":TxU

Have you seen a falcon stoop
accurate, unforeseen
and absolute, between
wind-ripples over harvest? Dread
of what's to be, is and has been—
Were we not better dead?
His wings churn air
to flight.
Feathers alight
with sun, he rises where
dazzle rebuts our stare,
wonder our fright.

He himself preferred the fowler passage, just before these lines: their use of rhyme and of consonant pattern is not so obvious. A minor poet? What other poet in this century, besides perhaps Zukofsky in the opening of "The Translation," would RISK that astonishing line: "A thrush in the syringa sings"? A minor poet? "I'd rather have somebody who is thinking of Horace call my poems bloody bad," he told Zukofsky in 1949, "than hear them praised by somebody who is thinking of—who? oh—Dylan Thomas."TxU If the very few translations he did (not all of them collected) are anything to go by, he is—or could have been—the best translator of Horace we have had. What makes his death so extraordinarily sad is not simply the neglect he suffered, though God knows he suffered that, but the sheer *loss* of work that neglect caused. And the misery he had, feeling that loss. "Minor poet, not conspicuously dishonest?" *September 1964*. Wylam: "I owe poems to ... Cooper Stephenson, who was killed in the great battle of March 1918, the closest of all friends I've had; and to Peggy Greenbank and her whole ambience, the Rawthey valley, the fells of Lunedale, the viking inheritance all spent save the faint smell of it, the ancient Quaker life accepted without thought and without suspicion that it might seem eccentric: and what happens when one deliberately thrusts love aside, as I then did—it has its revenge. That must be a longish poem."TxU He wrote *Briggflatts*, and the poem for and on Cooper Stephenson gestated. It, too, would be a Northern poem, and would include the Cliffords and the Percys and the Rising of 1569: *May 1972*. Wylam: "There is a conspiracy to pretend [teenage

girls] dont exist until they reach 18, and the P&O is in it. For a few days [on the *Canberra*, coming home from that hellish year in Victoria] I was a general grandfather-confessor to them and thought I'd extend my knowledge of these pleasing creatures, but then the youngest of them all suddenly annexed me, led me about the deck etc, and all the others sheered off. This is in fact a fortunate event. I'd been looking at the new moon, the April new moon that takes the attitude of Wordsworth's 'little boat' in *Peter Bell*, Ezra's barge of Ra-Set, I think the most convincing new moon I ever saw: and the next night an occultation of Jupiter who vanished of a sudden behind the old moon's corpse and then reappeared as a drop of molten silver slithering down the new moon's flanks; and I was fresh from this when I saw Linnaea, slim as the new moon and even blonder (and, alas! as remote as the moon), and there she was, Selanna, chick of Leda's egg immeasurably beautiful and not suspecting her beauty and the responsibility it lays on her. All I've been meditating for three years and could get no sense into lay around like blocks that have found their keystone, and I started picking them up to see how perfectly they fell into their places. So this little lass had only to look out of the corner of her eye to find an obedient servant... A bonus: her name, grandmother to granddaughter for six or seven generations, is a feminine form of Linnaeus, and though there's no certainty she seems to be descended of the man who named the flowers, as Adam did before him. Not Selene only, and Helen, but Persephone too. The difficulty is going to be how to translate what the myths imply into a mythless modern tongue." The drafts of *A New Moon* that he destroyed were good enough for most poets of his time, indeed better. A minor poet?

Such syllables flicker out of grass:
 'What beckons goes': and no glide lasts
 nor wings are ever in even beat long.
 A male season with paeonies, birds bright under thorn.
 Light pelts hard now my sun's low,
 it carves my stone as hail mud
 till day's net drapes the haugh,
 glaze crackled by flung drops.
 What use? Elegant hope, fever of tune,
 new now, next, in the fall, to be dust.

Sound. Consonants. Quantity. The attentive ear. But a progressivist: destroy it. "A poet's business is to get a language that wont have to rely on anything so slipshod as algebra,"^{CtY} he once said. Every word must be *new*. *November 1950. Lucca*: "You and I [Louis], have more than the whole ruck of others who have done well out of poetry. And I'm not even noticeably eccentric on the page! Why? What has dogged us?"^{TxU} The price an attentive eye (ear) pays is

its subjection to the immediate; it is attentive to it and vulnerable to it. *November 1932. Rapallo*: "One absorbs a fragment of somebody else's technique and in the process of absorbing it, something gets written, but whether that something is a poem or a technical exercise one cant tell—at least I cant—for some time." *April 1967. Goleta, California*: "While I am reading Pound Yeats and Eliot for one class and Williams, Zukofsky or David Jones for the other, I find I cant write a line which does not turn out to belong by right of rhythm or structure to one of these poets rather than to me, so that I've not had as much use for leisure as might be expected." The price of forced exile, teaching, is our loss. It is the very spareness and turbulent concreteness of his language; it is the astringency of his eye; it is his integrity and his refusal to compromise and his knowledge ("Nobody, it seems, has ever thought of setting Yeats' 'John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs Mary Moore' alongside of Juan Ruiz (archpriest of Hito)'s lament for Trotaconventos. They never cease to astonish me, these learned men, for they know so little"); it is what he reminds us we have lost; above all, it is his utter refusal to compromise that makes his death so sad. He distrusted splendour, the colossal (and therefore brutal), the magnificent: "Life is not all splendour," he said, and he denied, thereby, all euphemism. His favourite prose writers were Hume, Swift, Butler, Dickens; and his own prose, in hundreds of letters, in essays, in lectures, is amazingly clear. The bane of our age, he said, is our not "having to face what a man has made with deliberation and all his skill... . Every syllable you publish [of letters, biography, of casual utterance] will divert attention from the WORK."^{TXU} Living is a difficult business, demands a tenacious eye.

He was one of the three great Northern poets. The other two are the Gawain poet, and Edmund Spenser.

ALBERTA AND THE BUSH: THE DECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL
IDENTITY IN POSTMODERNIST CANADIAN AND AUSTRALIAN
FICTION

Foucault's archaeological dig is an appropriate metaphor for the processes by which postmodernist fiction addresses the leading question of identity. Tracking the trace through a labyrinth of possibilities, negotiating not only winding tracery but layered depths, narcissistically self-conscious and a foregrounder of artifice, the writer of postmodernist fiction is historian come clean, an interdisciplinary artificer who makes play from indeterminacies and who, as Trickster, invites the reader into the process by acknowledging the gamesome nature of language and the impossibility of ending. Against Truth, therefore, stands multiplicity, against certainty the entrancing ways of indeterminacy. Dispossessed of the Kingdom of Absolute Authority, the postmodernist writer is not God but Dionysus and Coyote, a seductive dabbler in outrage, a rager, who (damned by awareness, which John Barth calls "exhaustion"¹ and Harold Bloom "the anxiety of influence"²) creates inter-texts acknowledging the layers of the site, this "tissue of quotations"³ as Roland Barthes describes the text, necessarily granting power to the reader in the shared process of creating meanings.⁴

It is the case that, following Saussure's destabilisation of the sign and the deconstructive lessons of Derrida and Barthes, the death of God and radical interrogation of scientific explanation, meaning constructions have been problematized. The epistemological barriers are down. And, as a construct that variously transcends the regional and historical mosaic from which it is composed, national identity survives under threat—caught always in a dialectic between vain quests for unity and acknowledgements of diversity, it is like Yeats's figure of the dancers and the dance moving apart and coming together, shaped by ideas of similarity and difference which simultaneously deconstruct and reconstruct its configurations. Subverted from "within" by regionalism (itself open to radical deconstruction) and from "beyond" by internationalism, it is challenged not only by change but by the metaphorical character of its medium, language.

If one were to conceive of national identity as a text, it would have, like all texts, spatial and temporal dimensions. Regarded spatially it is a construct fraught with the problematics of selection and gaps but its pretensions towards

Truth are really exposed temporally, as it is read and thereby created and recreated ad infinitum by subsequent readers or reading positions, a hermeneutic gamble where empiricist exercises can hardly turn up trumps.

If, as I am suggesting, the cards are, and should be, stacked against national identity freaks why do they/we play the game? In this paper I shall concentrate on examples from the work of two writers of fiction, Canadian Robert Kroetsch and Australian Murray Bail.

Attempting definitions of national identity is a perilous undertaking but the perils have not deterred the undertakers; to the contrary, we rise like fatalistic salmon. But is it true that the English picture Australia as "a land where the sun shines every day over gleaming surf beaches, a land of gorgeous bikini-clad women who are all sexually frustrated because their sun-bronzed men spend their free time drinking ice cold beer, or a land of hot deserts where noble savages hunt and roam,"⁵ or, more seriously, that Canadians struggle to be English or French existing in a schizophrenic state of "between-ness"⁶ against the threat to the south?

'What about Canadians? Have you ever met an interesting Canadian?'

The comparisons, their anecdotes. Gerald pursed his lips.

'Yes, I'm not crazy about the Canadians.'

'I don't remember any,' Violet mysteriously cracked.⁷

Prescribing the nation to itself is a task often expected of fiction, as Robert Kroetsch acknowledges in this parody:

Dear Novelist: Please make us feel at home. The naming. The domesticating. Margaret Laurence. Robert Davies. Mordecai Richler. The Prairie dweller. The Ontario WASP. The urban ethnic. Each in his nagging way names us into safety, into at-homeness. Versions of Genesis. A victory of humanism—when some of us are sceptical about the humanistic tradition. But home is always a place of quarreling—and a place of departures and returns.⁸

The sting is in the tail/tale. At best we are, or should be, ambivalent about the whole business, at once secure in the sense of shared identification *and* piqued by its suppression of local difference, for that is where the vitality is. The polite civility of an "at-home" soon becomes stultifying, inducing, indeed, the very break-out which its form has first masked. Although as Kroetsch says, there may be, via this act of naming, re-versions of Genesis, the postlapsarian world is too full of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and there are too many fruit-

eaters, for a Paradise Regained. The Prairie sod-buster is not, as Kroetsch's Johnnie Backstrom insists, one of the "big-money boys, the grabbers from the East. The high-muckie-mucks that never worked a day in their lives. Those high-muckie-muck gougers from Ontario that wouldn't know grade-one hard northern wheat from a bowl of corn flakes."⁹ In postmodernist fiction the radical sense of difference in every way subverts the composure of similarity, of shared identity, and connections between the name and the named are too problematic for assurances about certain certainties.¹⁰

Kroetsch sees the task of exploring self and environment, for that is what national identity is, as one of un-naming, uncreating and uninventing:

At one time I considered it the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that, on the contrary, it is his task to unname.

and,

In recent Canadian fiction the major writers resolve the paradox—the painful tension between appearance and authenticity—by the radical process of demythologizing the systems that threaten to define them. Or, more comprehensively, they uninvent the world.¹¹

This process of uninvention is, of course, language-centered, and its operations are primarily evident in Kroetsch texts in artifice foregrounded, their self-reflexive acknowledgement of the processes of textual construction and the ambiguous status of the text vis-à-vis the world it only partly invokes and mainly creates. "I was constantly aware," he says, "that we both, and at once, record and invent these new places called Alberta and Saskatchewan."¹² The result is a prairie fiction which very deliberately deploys exaggeration, parody and farce in its deconstruction of this Canadian experience, using but transcending stereotypes of place and people and events. Kroetsch may use the "old dualities,"¹³ Coyote-God, Self-Community, Energy-Stasis, Past-Present, East-West, Rural-Urban, but it is in ways that deconstruct the binaries showing not a neat mediation of structural antitheses but, rather, their arbitrariness and the gamesome ways in which they subvert and infiltrate one another. So, for example, in *The Words of My Roaring*, Johnnie Backstrom "six-four in my stockinged feet, or nearly so, a man consumed by high ambitions, pretty well hung, and famed as a heller with women" (p. 4) may be the picaresque hero deconstructed, volatile and voracious, a trickster figure of abounding energy and appetite; but he is also confessional and compassionate and only partly opposed to his binary opposite and political opponent, local physician Doc. Murdoch, who attended Johnnie's birth, loved his mother and so on. So many playful

connections! Studhorseman Hazard Lepage, of *The Studhorse Man*,¹⁴ “damned coward frog” as his bathtub biographer Demeter Proudfoot calls him, expresses a phallic symbiosis with the stallion he leads about and not only collects bones and empty beer bottles as part of his mock epic quest but, “a man of inordinate lust” (p. 31), fulfils a role as living chaos versus history in his interlude with P. Cockburn (she the creator of life-sized wax figures) in a canopied four-poster bed in the provincial museum, watched over by her dead symbols of illustrious Albertans—three wax figures either side of the bed: an Indian chief, an early explorer, Mountie, missionary, early premier and a university president. As custodian of a Canadian national identikit, Cockburn would add a wax figure of this Studhorse man but, true to his name, Hazard eludes *that* commemoration in art. In *Gone Indian*,¹⁵ Jeremy Sadness—“child of Manhattan” who “dreamed Northwest” (p. 6)—may track the frontier in a process of chaotic unmaking in Alberta, but its monitoring by lapsed westerner Prof. Mark Madham (and beyond the narrator by Kroetsch, beyond the text by all readers—so many frames) emphasises not only the equivocal romanticism of Jeremy’s quest but its pastness. “Reconstructing” from Jeremy’s tapes the discontinuous narrative as massive letter, Madham (“Mad-ham,” or postlapsarian “Adam” ambivalent about what was lost in Eden) represents an antithetical frame of reference and another time-scale: the urban(e) cynicism of cosseted academic challenging and being challenged by Jeremy Sadness’s plunge into the Canadiana of winter festival, forests and valley, ice and snow, a dream of death and re-creation. The frontier metaphor, the “far interior,” becomes a site for unmaking of identity or, in the language of the text, “the consequence of the northern prairies to human definition [is] the diffusion of personalities into a complex of possibilities” (p. 152). What indeed, does the disappearance of Jeremy (named after Bentham) Sadness with Bea Sunderman (Earth Mother) into the northern landscape signify? Certainly Kroetsch as author has his cake and eats it too (and why not) by posing yet criticising for its pretentiousness the elaborate let-us-decreate-the-Fall scheme, a parody implicit, for example, in the titles Jeremy concocts for his lapsed thesis: “Going Down With Orpheus,” “The Artist as Clown and Pornographer,” “The Plot Against Plot,” “The Terrors of Completion.” Although the narrative implies a thesis not written but lived, while all the time it is of course written, it also undoes any meanings that construct might have. It would be a devil of a thesis to grade!

Artifice is foregrounded in each text, in the multi-directional play on names, the chaotic events of the comic quests and in the elaborate presentational processes—processes that emphasise play, discontinuity and fantasy. Although the texts variously create senses of place and lived experience, a prairie identity composed of farms and beer parlours, stampedes and festivals, snow and ice and

always the vast space of the landscape, these are also deconstructed in the aesthetics of artifice which is the process of their presentation.

It is in *Badlands*,¹⁶ however, that Kroetsch's archaeological dig is most meaningful, the metaphor become literal while retaining its metaphorical suggestiveness. The William Dawe Expedition of 1916 into the Alberta badlands becomes the text in which the past, prehistory, is explored layer by geological layer as the male questers this time search for dinosaur bones, motivated by male pride and the possibility of fame. It is another quest where denials of woman and home are part of a ritual, both naturalistic and fantastic, central in the narrative and in the myths that transcend it. Kroetsch has frequently acknowledged Conrad's influence,¹⁷ and the parallels between Marlow's quest into the Congo and Dawe's into the Badlands are obvious, one a reversal of the evolutionary development of "civilization" and the other an excursion through surface sediment and shale into the bone beds of geological eras. Journeys into interiors as into time, the river trips also suggest quests into the self, into the unconscious, a radical decomposition beyond history in search of origins, the "uncreation" about which Kroetsch writes in defining the Canadian writer's task.¹⁸ Margaret Atwood has also noted in contemporary Canadian writing this tendency to excavate: "there is," she says, "a distinct archaeological motif in Canadian literature—unearthing the buried and forgotten past."¹⁹

Moose Jaw, Sask. At a recent meeting here of the Saskatchewan Writer's Union Robert Kroetsch discussing Canadian writers' obsessive investigation of history, offered this comment: 'Fuck the past.' Some participants at the conference objected to his language.²⁰

Commenting on this note, Ann Mandel points to the ambiguity of Kroetsch's remark: "It could be construed as a proposition for or against a necrophiliac literature,"²¹ history as rejection or reincarnation of the wandering priapic hero of Kroetsch's fiction! But what explains this obsession with history? To what extent does the past define the present?

When Anna Dawe "recreates" the narrative of the Dawe expedition from her father's field notes, interleaving her own commentaries, the double narrative strategy enables Kroetsch to very profitably interweave time scales, present and subvert gender stereotypes, and consider influence, while creating a discontinuous text that confronts history and the whole question of identity upon which generalizations are made and shall founder. It is in this respect that *Badlands* deconstructs history as influence, providing a decreative process that, in Kroetsch's terms, permits individuality against stereotype (dancers against the dance of national identity). The recreative decreative process frees Anna Dawe

from the burden of her past, that of an absent father in a patriarchal social order. She commences:

Why it was left to me to mediate the story I don't know: women are not supposed to have stories. We are supposed to sit at home, Penelopes to their wars and their sex. As my mother did. As I was doing. (p. 3)

and she answers Web's comment, "There is no such thing as a past," with "There is nothing else, Web" (p. 4). But ending in the vision of the grizzly bear dangling from a helicopter, ludicrous and impotent, comically human and male, above the source of the river of her father's 1916 expedition where she at last scatters the field notes (the tie), her quest symbolically frees her from the past—from the father, from the male.

William Dawe is presented as another wandering male, less phallic than Johnnie Backstrom, Hazard Lepage or Jeremy Sadness, and not as wild, but, like them, engaged in an ambiguous quest. Anna Dawe's deconstructive description of the male ritual defines a recurring theme not only in literature but in the identity question:

Good God, how men do love their symbols. Each of them, every man, symbolic of another. Fugitive. From all the women in the world, no doubt. (p. 63)

It is the homo-erotic behaviour of males at hunting, fishing, drinking, swearing, athletics, story-telling and work (Kroetsch's list),²² the male who circles the house warily, the house where the woman (desired and feared) waits. Although *Badlands* uses it, it also parodies the image of the male adventurer, Canadian as Frontiersman, not only by emphasising ambiguities in Dawe's expedition but by placing it within Anna Dawe's feminist critique and by transforming the Woman-Who-Waits (keeper of the hearth to which the Hero returns bearing trophies and tales) into the Woman-Who-Travels, the Female Quester, one of that half of society which definitions of national identity traditionally repress or ignore. The badlands of Southern Alberta may be a topographical reality and bonerushes an historical event but demythologizing the male story, history, history, Kroetsch's archaeological enterprise uncovers a site where, the past thrown off, the naming can begin again. "There are," says Anna Dawe, "no truths, only correspondences" (p. 45).

As an interrogator of inheritance, Kroetsch subjects the Canadian past to a deconstructive shaking by foregrounding the artifice of systems, language and narrative, those means by which identity is shaped. His fictions give life not to

fixed perceptions of national identity but to energy and change and possibility, to the decreative/recreative process itself.

In deconstructive play similar to the unmaking and uncreating processes in Kroetsch's work, Australian Murray Bail's story, "The Drover's Wife"²³ addresses that most tenacious myth central to discussions of Australian identity, the bush tradition. The story begins:

There has perhaps been a mistake—but of no great importance—made in the denomination of this picture. The woman depicted is not 'The Drover's Wife.' She is my wife. We have not seen each other now ... it must be getting on thirty years. This portrait was painted shortly after she left—and had joined him. Notice she has very conveniently hidden her wedding hand. It is a canvas 20 x 24 inches, signed 1/r 'Russell Drysdale.'

I say 'shortly after' because she has our small suit-case—Drysdale has made it look like a shopping bag—and she is wearing the sandshoes she normally wore to the beach. Besides, it is dated 1945.

It is Hazel alright. (pp. 55-56)

Through Bail's story we read Drysdale's painting, reproduced in black and white as pictorial epigraph to the story, and its predecessor text Lawson's "The Drover's Wife," icon of Australiana with its version of nineteenth-century outback life and considerable responsibility in fixing identikit of the laconic Aussie wanderer, whose absence can't be helped, and the battling woman who waits. A proliferation of texts, of reading frames.

The parody is clever, deconstructing the earlier story by reversing the main props: whereas Lawson's female hero battles the odds and dreams of the city, Bail's Hazel has left the city for the bush—like Kroetsch's Jeremy Sadness, she has, by going drover, "gone Indian." "Gordon," Adelaide dentist, the speculative narrator as deserted male who minds the children, is bemused and no bush romantic. And the site of this archaeological dig is not so much Bail's urban male narrator/narrative as the intertext, the conjunction of a late nineteenth century story, a mannered Australian painting and the postmodernist text which incorporates them together with the abundant mythology of the bush/outback tradition which its parody evokes and challenges. What can be the currency of Lawson, Paterson and Rudd for ideas about national identity: literary cum historical curiosity or central inheritance and pervasive sub-stratum? At the very least, Bail's text problematizes the discussion and although one may wonder whether Hazel gone bush legitimates or subverts Henry Lawson's archetypal figure, its ironies mock the idea of *national* identity.

The play continues in the subversive semiotics of Bail's novel *Homesickness*. Its deconstructive procedure is immediately evident in the exaggerated heterogeneity of the band of thirteen Australian tourists abroad. Pointedly differentiated by name, status, interests, speech and sexual preference, they are eastern European, Italian, English, French and German, heterosexual and homosexual, hedonistic and ascetic, brash and introvert, humourless and the joker, but "Australian," a comic mosaic which eludes the "melting pot." Proliferating through the continent-hopping of their farcical grand tour, amazing Australian graffiti, "Australian" values and "Australian" artefacts and performances satirise national name-calling, treating the stereotyping as an absurd cultural construct while deploying language as a flexible instrument of play. So, for example, these museum hunters discover, tucked away in East Yorkshire, the "Corrugated Iron Museum," memorial to Australian "quality of life" (p. 114), where highlights amongst rare collectors' items are a corrugated iron dunny, and a corrugated iron violin on which the obliging English guide plays "Waltzing Matilda" and, as if to balance the imperial register, "God Save the Queen." In Africa the Museum of Handicrafts contains not artefacts of African culture but waste of western civilization—old lawn mowers, used toothpaste tubes, false teeth, a French cigarette-rolling machine, early TV, a soda-water syphon, clocks and plastic aeroplanes. A round-table discussion suggests that the French are "piggy to foreigners," the Yanks are "generous," the English are "nose in the air" but "miles better than the Irish," the Scots have no sense of humour, Poles "keep to themselves," the Spanish are "a marvellous people but could be better," the Dutch wear clogs but are clean, and "what about the Swedes then?"—"Socialism and suicides. Blue eyes. Volvos." The conclusion? "I keep saying, we're not bad the more you look around" (pp. 225-227). Self-consciously ridiculous, Bail's check-list satire demonstrates not only the absurdity of such caricatures of national identity but subverts as well the solipsism it might seem to promote. In vain search of self, the tourists' archaeological exercise takes them to Lady Pamela Hunt-Gibbons, expert in genealogy—"from the colonial back-blocks folk want to know their origins, and test the old soil" (p. 87); the minibus driver says "I'm always fetching Kiwis, bloody Aussies and Mapleleaves ..." (p. 87). But the text's archaeological exercise probes deeper, uncreating and un-naming, to use Kroetsch's language, affirming the futility of a search for origins as totalization or explanation and promoting indeterminacy by parody in its elaborate deconstruction of national identity.

National identity, then, may be described, in Foucault's terminology, as a "discursive formation."²⁴ There is something to talk about however problematic it can be demonstrated to be; there is no shortage of statements on the subject however fraught these are with gaps, limits and games; there is a carnival of possibilities and, as in carnivals, Lords of Misrule frequent the field, or at least it is so in postmodernist fiction. Despite the challenges of regionalism and inter-

nationalism, the pitfalls of reductive definition and the undeniable interplay of differences, the pursuit continues, always, as Derrida would say, "sous rasure."²⁵

Is Canada "a kind of global Switzerland,"²⁶ as Northrop Frye has suggested, buoyant after a history of diffidence, and Australia, according to Jonathan King, a land of "waltzing materialism?"²⁷ Questioning older formations, each of these perspectives necessarily invites its own shaking apart. Whatever side of whichever fence one chooses, stereotypes should be challenged, and our postmodernist writers of fiction are in the fray choosing most mornings, as Robert Kroetsch says, to be not God but Coyote. Problematizing the field, the uncreating process promotes discourse and initiates new ideas about that which it deconstructs. A shape-shifter, then, national identity will continue to captivate attention as it slips away from attempts to nail it down.

NOTES

1. Barth's term for the condition of saturation or awareness, "all the stories have been told" that he sees troubling the contemporary writer. See John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, 220, No. 2, August 1967, pp. 29-34.

2. Defining "poetic misprision," Bloom discusses the anxiety experienced by poets as a result of the influence of "strong" poets, the tradition. Firmly centered on intertextuality, this theory views every text as an intertext and influence as inescapable. See *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (New York: University Press, 1975).

3. Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image, Music Text*, Tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.

4. Although "reader response" theories share destabilization of the authority of the author and the printed text itself, they are indeed various. Some of this variety may be seen in two recent anthologies: Jane P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism, From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (ed.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

5. Geoffrey Barker, writing from the London Bureau of "The Age" quoted in Jonathan King, *Waltzing Materialism* (London: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 5.

6. The expression is Marshall McLuhan's in his discussion of Canada as "a land of multiple boundaries, psychic, social and geographic." See McLuhan, "Canada: The Borderline Case," in David Staines (ed.), *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 226-248.

7. Murray Bail, *Homesickness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 225.

8. Robert Kroetsch, "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," from a paper delivered to a conference in Calgary, February 1978, with this same title and reprinted in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays* edited by Frank Davey and bpNichol (*Open Letter*, Spring 1983, Fifth Series, No. 4), p. 43.

9. Robert Kroetsch, *The Days of My Roaring* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 110.

10. The perception is a commonplace in post-Saussurean discussion, and central in Kroetsch's comments on literature and writing. See, for example, Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch" in *Canadian Fiction Magazine* (Spring/Summer 1977) 24/25, pp. 33-52; Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), pp. 141-142; "On Being an Alberta Writer," in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays*, p. 71.

11. Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* (1974) III, 3, p. 43 and reprinted in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays*, pp. 17-22.

12. "On Being an Alberta Writer," p. 75.

13. Kroetsch deploys this structuralist perception and patterning in his novels and discusses it in essays. Increasingly, however, he displays in discussion the post-structuralist dismantling of the binaries that the works of fiction, it could be said, must always also practice. See, for example, *Labyrinths of Voice*, pp. 142, 176, 186.

14. Robert Kroetsch, *The Studhorse Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), reprinted Markham, Ontario: Paperjacks, 1977. Page references are to the Paperjacks edition.

15. Robert Kroetsch, *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1973).

16. Robert Kroetsch, *Badlands* (Toronto: New Press, 1975), reprinted Toronto: General Paperbacks, 1982. Page references are to the Paperbacks edition.

17. See, for example, *Labyrinths of Voice*, pp. 12-13, 22.

18. See, "Unhiding the Hidden," and Robert Kroetsch, "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue" in *Mosaic* (Spring 1981), XIV, 2, pp. v-xi. Both reprinted in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays*.

19. Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972), p. 112.

20. Quoted in Ann Mandel, "Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch," in *Open Letter*, (Spring 1978), 3, 8, p. 54.

21. "Uninventing Structures," p. 54.

22. And Kroetsch discusses the gender separations in "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays*.

23. Murray Bail, "The Drover's Wife," in *Contemporary Portraits* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975).

24. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 31-39.

25. This is the state of things, according to Derrida, once God, History, Author, Truth, the Word are removed as the guarantees of definitive single meaning: "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification 'ad infinitum'." (Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 249.

26. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion" in *Literary History of Canada Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 2nd edition, vol. III, p. 328.

27. Title of King's study of Australian identity and culture, a satirical comparison of the "real" with the "mythical." See note 5.

LANGUAGE AND 'PARADISE'

My writing has almost never taken the form of a single entity. When I finished *The Guard*, I began a notebook project, something of an exegesis, and amplification, and adjustment, and extension of the trajectory of the poem. The notebook is labelled *Language & 'Paradise,'* which are the last two words of the poem. In this notebook, I've been writing a commentary on the poem, sentence by sentence. This takes into account my sense that the subject of the poem shifts and differs sentence by sentence, but it doesn't take into account the effect of the line on these sentences.

I have an imprecise vocabulary for talking to myself about the metaphysics of my work, but I'll tell you what it is. I think the central issue of *The Guard* is phenomenological, in the sense that the phenomenological situation includes perceiver, perception (or perceiving), perceived, and the various meanings of their relationships, which are not at all mild. When I say the perceived, I mean not only objects, but events, emotions, ideas, and the various interconnections existing in the world. I assume the reality of everything. Thus, if I can say that the poem includes the perceived, it may include sentences, for example, about desire, various domestic and professional events, political opinion, and the fear of death, as well as a good deal of description. When I say perception, since I am thinking about a poem, I locate (just as I in fact experience) the site of the perceiving in language itself. It is here that the interplay between line and sentence is the most important. As I see it, and this is partially in retrospect (which I mention because I want to make clear that I learned most of these things by writing the poem, not in preparation for it, and that this perceiving from within the writing is a central element of my practical poetics, as well as of its metaphysics; it provides me with the necessity for writing), if the sentence represents the entirety of a perception, a complete thought, then the line might be taken to represent the shape or the scale or measure of our consciousness of it. A perception might come at one in segments, as planes, and the line represents such a plane, a unit of consciousness. Thus each line is an aspect of an idea or observation or feeling. When one sentence ends and another sentence begins in a single line, then the connection between the two is part of the plane of consciousness. This may sound slightly abstract, but it is actually only a

very simple way to read lines. For example, the third line of *The Guard* is one complete sentence, followed by just one word of the next sentence: "The full moon falls on the first. I." The connection between "first" and "I" is obvious, and also somewhat funny, I think. I indicate that when the poem begins with the question, "Can one take captives by writing," this one is I. (A similar construction occurs in my poem *The Green*, in the sentence: "In the sentence 'one left the sunny corner bedroom, crossed an open hallway that was waste space as large as a room but unfurnished and without doors, turned at the newel post and descended on stairs that reached one landing after seven steps and another after fifteen,' I am the one.")

The rhythmic element in the poem is something I am often thinking about when I write, and not solely as an aesthetic quality—as part of the poem's grace or beauty, say, in one place, or its clumsiness and irritability in another. When I am writing, to the extent that it is equivalent to thinking, I am doing so with a certain rhythm of attention. And there is another area which perhaps only rhythm can consider, and that is the conflict between time and space which is the other central theme of *The Guard*.

Some of my thoughts about rhythm in poetry—the rhythm of the sentence and the counter-rhythm of the line and the significance of the conflict and interplay between them—is merely an extension of ideas expressed by Osip Brik in an essay entitled "Contributions to the Study of Verse Language":

Verse is not regulated simply by the laws of syntax, but by the laws of rhythmic syntax, that is, a syntax in which the usual syntactic laws are complicated by rhythmic requirements.

The primary word combination in poetry is the line. The words in a line have been combined according to a definite rhythmic law and, simultaneously, according to the laws of prose syntax. The very fact that a certain number of words coexist with the two sets of laws constitutes the peculiarity of poetry. In the line, we have the results of a rhythmico-syntactic word combination. (Matejka and Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics*, p. 122.)

One might not agree that "the primary word combination in poetry is the line," since some of us are writing poetry that doesn't use lines, or in which lines have been transmuted into paragraphs. And Osip Brik is assuming a poetry of regular metrics and a language where the prose syntax is very definite and is evident not in word order but in the words themselves, which have different forms depending on whether they are the subject or the direct object or the indirect object or the object of a preposition in the sentence, etc. Nonetheless, it seems to me that I could extrapolate the meaning, if not the details, of this idea and apply it to my own work.

The counterpoint between line and sentence establishes two series of durations. And without equating the sentence with space and the line with time, it still seemed to me that in *The Guard*, where the writing includes an aesthetic (and therefore psychological) struggle between the two, it was desirable to use a form that was rhythmically complicated. I wanted to set the work in motion against itself, so to speak, to establish the inward concentricity, the pressure, the implosive momentum that stands for the conflict between time and space in the poem.

As for the position of the perceiver in the phenomenological situation—or in the poem, a poem—it is a person, and the subject of the work I am working on now called *The Person*. I was already thinking about the perceiver, however, when I was writing *The Guard*, although the emphasis there is on the middle term, perceiving. It seemed to me even in *The Guard* that to understand the person, as a perceiver, one had to take into account the dynamics of individual psychology, personal history, the influence of class background and an individual's attempt to challenge it, and so forth. Especially, one had to consider the language in which all of this social matter is situated. To cite only a simple and raw instance:

I and my musician friend very love the jazz
music and very many study if listen your saxophone
quartet playing, therefore request
your if no expensive so if would such
dear send me some jazz records

This is an unaltered extract from a letter to my husband, who is himself a musician, from a man in Czechoslovakia, who signs his letters sometimes Fan Boy and sometimes Jazz Boy. I liked the passage because it has already a natural bebop rhythm and therefore is what it is about, a jazz letter. Of course, as an analysis of the perceiver, it is very primitive, since it is merely quoting. I included a similar type of quotation in the second part of the poem, where I include part of a column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* called "The Question Man." This particular day's question was, "What is the dirtiest room in your house?"

The kitchen: everyone eats
in different cycles—yeh
the dishes are all over the counter ...
yeh, food's left out, things are on the stove
yeh, the floor's filthy—that's amazing!
have you been here before?

There are several things happening here, but I can point out in this context that we hear the voice of the housewife, and thus, from my point of view, it represents material from the work place.

I'm going to read various passages from the notebook about *The Guard*, but not in sequence. I am not taking the sentences in the order in which they appear in the poem. I pulled these particular pages out of the notebook and arranged them in an order that might suggest several constellations of meaning in the work. The notebook has become the site, so to speak, for writing about my poetics, and it is an on-going project.

But this brings up another issue. There are quite a number of lines in *The Person* that come from my comments about *The Guard*, and thus, to that extent, material for the present project is generated by the previous one. *The Guard*, in terms of *The Person*, is unfinished. In fact, as a matter of necessity, and as the reflection of a basic observation about the condition of things, I won't regard any of my work as finished. I don't want to resist the book, but it is an extremely problematic entity if it implies a finished work.

I say this in order to give an indication of my method, which always finds itself beginning in the middle. And in saying so, I am both reflecting on Carla Harryman's work called *The Middle* and echoing a line from the first Canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Canto which was the source of the original impulse for *The Guard*. I began writing the poem propelled by the charged aporia that is essential lyricism, and in which Dante finds himself, biographically ("Midway this way of life we're bound upon, I woke to find myself ...") and poetically ("I gained such good, that, to convey The tale, I'll write what else I found"). The landscape proposed by 'paradise' seemed to represent a horizontal or spatial sense of time, eternity being that moment when time is transmuted into space. And the significance of the figure of Virgil, whom Dante calls "my author" and who personifies Poetry, is that he promises to guide Dante to 'paradise'.

The relationship of language to 'paradise' seemed to propose a relationship of time to space, and to posit a form.

If the world is round & the gates are gone... .
The landscape is a moment of time
that has gotten in position.

Here I began to wonder about the nature of consciousness, and to regard consciousness itself as form, and form as a middle.

* * *

The tree
stands up aching in the sun. (part 1)

This entire section of the poem throws time into space, until “The sky was packed // which by appearing endless seems inevitable.”

When I was in high school I read novels, and the one I liked best and by instinct was *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. The work was for me at the time more revelatory than comprehensible, perhaps. The first thing I liked was that in order to begin (and it is typically adolescent to think obsessively about beginning), Laurence Sterne had to go to the middle and remain there. This may be a characteristic of thought which is habitually concrete rather than habitually abstract. The physical analogy would be with moving objects around or travel, both of which displace the middle while at the same time containing everything within its range and on its terms. And this all has to do with an experience of space and of time.

In thinking about time and space, I'm thinking about the non-isolability of objects and events in the world, our experience of them, and our experience of that experience. In phenomenological terms, I am assuming realness in the world and focussing on the nature of perception, when language is the site of that consciousness—or, more specifically, when a poem is the site of that consciousness.

I say *poem*, because I'm thinking about art—artistic work. When the temporal dominates in a work, it exerts a particular pressure (hence the tree's “aching in the sun”), and one's response is likely to include restlessness, and sometimes anxiety. It challenges the span of the self, and for that reason the work incites one to activity. Whereas, when the spatial dominates the work, the experience of the work may include a sense of calm. Landscape is reassuring, “Like the wind that by its bulk inspires confidence.” The temporal press and spatial reassurance are both desirable aesthetic effects, but very different. At the end of *The Guard*, I say it is the difference between language and ‘paradise.’

* * *

Paradise encouraged cuppings. (part 7)

Meanwhile, in section 7, I notice that the fragility of sequence increases the palpability of things.

“The exact finish bristles (those clouds / intend thunder).”

“The antennae of sex.”

“Morning buzzes and purrs in wide erasures.”

“Aluminums knock against the enamel sink.”

“Ear, the already-hollow, mouthpiece.”

"Perfection defeats the world // for inspection. There's poem / with anything in it."

And so forth. This palpability of things has, for me, both metaphysical and aesthetic force. It is both philosophical and physical.

It is in this context that I am drawn to the materiality of poetry.

When I first began to write, in seventh grade, I planned to write a novel, because novels require a lot of paper and typing. Instead, as it turned out, I wrote an introduction, which was, however, very long and satisfied for a time my desire for paper and typing. This writing, though it was the introduction and not the fiction, nonetheless was full of symbolism and contained a description of "Eden" (which is not to be confused with 'paradise'). I elaborated on the beginning of the novel, which never existed, and I said that I found myself a perpetual participant of the middle—or, as I put it, "I find myself in medias res."

Meanwhile the English teacher said, "If you want to describe Eden, you can't say velvet grass, because royalty and interiors didn't then yet exist. Your adjectives must have reference to your material."

* * *

*The tongue
becomes observant the tongue gets tough
inevitably, like a fruitskin. (part 6)*

Modern physiology must take into account the things that persons perceive.

"The tongue becomes observant and the tongue gets tough" concerns the relationship of the body to perception, and more specifically of the mouth to the languages of expression and description. It is, for example, one thing to say that the horses are galloping and another to push and pull air bubbles with the tongue against the roof of the mouth rapidly in a specific rhythm perceived to resemble the hoofbeats on the road.

As Merleau-Ponty says, "In trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning, we shall have the opportunity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy" (*The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 174).

In this case, language is not a form of mediation, but im-mediate; the word peach bears the same relationship to the object as the object does to the word. It is not so much a matter of equivalence as of reciprocity. Persistence reverses the insistent pursuit. The resulting vibration of this reversible movement, however, is unstable. (This instability is one of the central factors in *The Person*.) For example, the whole of the passage which includes this line (the beginning of the

6th part of *The Guard*) sets time in space to a static transition, jiggling. The condition I imagine is more geographic than spatial, the parameters measured longitudinally or latitudinally. The shift is shaken by the hunger of restlessness, and then the stasis is restored again momentarily in the materiality of the writing itself.

Loosely a bullfrog exits a pond.
My heart did suck ... to fidget, soothed
... by seawater, restless ... against
the unplugged phone. Arfing up the street
in a rainstorm as a rose
with ardent jiggling stands. A jackhammer
shatters the pavement—was this repression
radiant with static and a single dog.

However the lawnmower is idling
outdoors ... it is like slowly throwing oneself
... as if simply to walk into arms ... so much
restlessness because one is hungry. The tongue
becomes observant and the tongue gets tough
inevitably, like a fruitskin. Now it migrates
(I hear the pen pat as I come to the end
of the phrase and make a comma) in G-minor.

* * *

Loosely a bullfrog exits a pond. (part 6)

This line is almost descriptive. I say 'almost' because elements in the sentence are burdened with the choices made in its composition. "Loosely" for example is emphatic because it comes first. It is the gear in which the verb drives the noun. "Exits" is more literary than literal—the word "exit" is formal, even structural. One exits through the functional element; this is the reductive case of the door for people, of the pond for the frog.

* * *

*We take up
an unconventional position between two posts
(whenever I hear "opposition" I vomit). (part 6)*

Between public and private is the difference between language and thought, or should be unless the difference breaks down or is overcome by a hypothetical ecstasy that postpones mediation. This has to do with the gap between mind and body. Few things are as surprising, incredible, as the actual physical existence of anything, when its moment, so to speak, has arrived. The infant at two months discovers and accepts its hands, but there are, usually unlasting, times, later, when the person, shocked, rejects them. At those times it seems perhaps preferable to be unreal, although in our anxiety we continue to struggle to become real.

To stress a false dichotomy ("whenever I hear 'opposition' I vomit"), sometimes one wants to be real as a body and sometimes as a mind. In either case, one is sustained by resemblance, by the conjunctive and comparative which are forms of number.

The parenthetical comment is from a letter from the poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, to whom *The Guard* is dedicated, writing from Leningrad:

But about this subject, the hatred and love (I vomit when I come across the word 'opposition') of the things and names given to the poet to comprehend—he destroys the connection ... he struggles in his creation of appropriate places for everything and everybody... . But the language of meanings (definitions)—in spite of numerous formulas—becomes something Roman, moving toward myth, crossing the boundaries but not finding its destiny ... I foresee going ahead of language into the high world where vision, hearing, memory, the body are not the first, the second, nor third, element, no longer need time nor space, nor God, because they are not within *this* framework, within *this* condition. There is "the sadness of language."

* * *

The twitching of number
in what would have been vacancy. (part 4)

Time is the violent element that makes space appear irrational. Is this accurate?

Numbers resemble prepositional phrases more than the adjectives or nouns they are, since in themselves they express relational concepts: with, after, beside, beyond, inside, including, among, before, by means of, together with, after, excluding, and so on as well as preposition-like constructions such as more and less than.

Like the preposition, number refers to its frame of reference at the same time that it is specific within the frame, to the whole as well as to the part.

Beyond this, number is more oxymoronic than symbolic. As an oxymoron, that is a compact, summarized, paradoxical, resolved but unstable, elementary contradiction (like “sweet pain,” “audible silence,” etc.) number is implosive, and more ebullient than oppositional.

Oxymoron ... reveals a compulsion to fuse all experience into a unity... . (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*)

* * *

Can people take captives by writing ...
(first line of *The Guard*)

Here, as Dante says, “I turn the face of my words towards the poem itself, and address it.” (Later I vary his very words: “The windows resort / to equivalence as spring to cruelty / with evenly-hovering attention, and turn / the face of its words to me / just as water melts in the fire.”)

The word “captives” refers to several things. First, and most important, to capturing the world in words. I want to explain to myself the nature of the desire to do so, and I wonder aloud if it is possible. The poem opens with a challenge to the poem itself and raises the lyric dilemma.

Various responses (it would be inaccurate to call them answers) occur throughout the poem. For example:

... It's
as if I were seeing myself
propped on my hand, with ...
putting something loud in the mouth ...
an egg, an arena

at the sun ... the top
is elegant, and ... from a distance
and found ... it's devoutly boosting
... in the nighttime resistance ...
the littler splendor of the snow, the line of sight
bending in that direction in order to predict
... what happens to it when we're alone?

and all that I undreamt of ...
but I'm not looking for a reason to complain
... the bottom is devout, the fog burns off
clouds blow over, blue skies reach up

everything is out ... or predicate an out-of-doors
... it's soul voyeurism ... your *own censor*
has passed you! ... he's such a sunny person

with the other arm ... after all
romantic love proves out ... adept at gathering
... loses some of its power
but I don't know what he sees. (part 5)

I intended this brief essay on consciousness and language to include a small charge of eroticism, suggestive of the appetite of consciousness for language. This is not solely metaphorical.

One may read the passage as ecstatic or one may read it as anxious. If anxious, then one may consider the anxiety as basic to a consideration of the relationship of language to perception.

This relationship assumes the reality and relevance of the world (which in another context is basic to the social (political) commitment or attachment of the poem). Phenomenology, says Merleau-Ponty,

is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science,' but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is. (Preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii.)

* * *

We will never know a true confession. (part 2)

Earlier in this same stanza occurs this sentence: "The urge to tell the truth is strong."

A confession is a complication of the desire to tell. Such desire is a recurrent theme of *The Guard*, and it almost couldn't be otherwise. "The open mouths of people are yellow & red." In the first stanza of the poem people are described as if inflamed with an appetite for speech. The colors are those of industrial fires and of a ripe peach.

The desire to tell is an effect of language itself on the psyche, which is, then, part of a linguistic trajectory. As I wrote elsewhere (*Poetics Journal* 4, p. 139), "Language is one of the forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless."

Such restlessness, appearing in the form of hunger, eroticism, and persistent movement, prevails in the poem. "I could only get comfortable by walking" and "it is like slowly throwing oneself / ... as if simply to walk into arms ... so much restlessness because one is hungry. The tongue becomes observant and the tongue gets though / inevitably, like a fruitskin."

The desire to tell is also indicative of a particular relationship with the social and with time. With regard to the latter, it is possible that the restlessness which desire manifests is aimed ultimately at overcoming time. To tell is a form of accumulation. It has the potential to reverse the order of events, or to implode a sequence infinitely, as in the picture of the person holding the picture of the person holding the picture, etc. "They have achieved the inability to finish what they say."

The desire to tell is an insistent pursuit.

But the line, "We will never know a true confession," also represents the imposition of the confession on reality. The confession attempts to relieve the related narrative of meaning, so that only the materials are left: pure aesthetics. The model is a conversation with an omniscient listener—one who, by definition, in being omniscient, is the original knower of the narrative, and who knows—all at once as a single thing—what the narrator must think of as the beginning, middle, and end.

A confession is a particular kind of narrative, one in which the relationship to time is formulated as a sense of guilt. Guilt, remorse, and various other forms of anxiety are part of a temporal psychology, a sense of sequence and consequence without lateral possibility. The confession is an attempt to sidestep this.

Later in the poem, the desire to tell comes into conflict with education, in the line, "'I'm dancing on the inside!'—'Don't show off!'"

* * *

*My heart did suck ... to fidget, soothed
... by seawater, restless ... against
the unplugged phone. (part 6)*

This is the second sentence of part 6, and it follows the sentence, "Loosely a bullfrog exits a pond."

This part of the poem is mostly about the erotic—sex, hunger, restless intellectual and emotional urges, aesthetic passions, etc., when they are felt in the body, when they seem to be lodged in the heart or stomach or liver. A less irritable view of this same scene appears in the first part of the poem: "Such air" (i.e., the weather and air that is drawn to us in the first stanza of the poem) "always flies to the heart and liver, faces nature / with its changing pan, floating

boats on the bay / far from authority, sent truly / speaking in little weights" and so on.

Lyricism—the lyric impulse, or the desire to write, as I feel it—is interior to the conjunction of eros and language, and that is the abstraction which this section of the poem fills.

"My heart did suck"—refers to yearning. In this phrase also I am comparing the heart to a bullfrog. The bullfrog lives in a membrane, its skin, and resembles the heart, the kidney, or a lung. The bullfrog is like an organ. Elsewhere I refer to the skin's containing endlessness and the skin's containing character—organs, too.

The two middle terms ("to fidget, soothed ... by seawater, restless") represent a minor conflict between space and time, when a dissatisfied person is jostled by their collision.

The telephone, as the organ of interruption, increases the tension—or would if it weren't unplugged. Elsewhere I wrote, "The telephone is a weapon." Interruption is endemic to experience, and violent.

This is not the first appearance of ellipses. The first line of the poem ends with three dots. There they simply adjust the trajectory of a thought. The thought rebounds as if it were a light image hitting a screen—such a screen as renders films for viewing or photos for printing, in which case they resemble journalistic dots: "your *own censor* has passed you!"

As the poem proceeds, it accumulates these dots. Between them the poem pushes, not at the outer boundaries of language and expression but through their substance, through the substance of articulate thought.

They function within a sentence as another rhythmic element, a correlary to the line break, and like the line break they discontinue a sentence without closing it. They postpone the realization of the extendability of the thought. They represent, in this sense, the discontinuity of consciousness within a pattern of recurrence.

As Bob Perelman says in his poem "Days":

In fact you don't
Live a life one
Day at a time.
Some days you skip.
Come back to them
Later, others never occur.

Having experienced consciousness as discontinuous, I am forced to disagree with William James's characterization of consciousness as a continuum, what he calls "a stream of consciousness," and I feel encouraged to disagree because his own analysis of language (at least of sentences) as the model and the medium for

perception contradicts the metaphor. Consciousness more closely resembles a stack or pile, in which sentences or parts of sentences are the plates or potentially vast planes in a pile, banking frontally.

If anyone asks what is the mind's object when you say 'Columbus discovered America in 1492,' most people will reply 'Columbus' or 'America,' or, at most, 'the discovery of America.' They will name a substantive kernel or nucleus of the consciousness, and say the thought is 'about' that... . But the *Object* of your thought is really its entire content or deliverance, neither more nor less. It is a vicious use of speech to take out a substantive kernel from its content and call that its object; and it is an equally vicious use of speech to add a substantive kernel not articulately included in its content, and to call that its object... . The object of my thought in the previous sentence, for example, is strictly speaking neither Columbus nor America, nor its discovery. It is nothing short of the entire sentence, 'Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492.' And if we wish to speak of it substantively, we must make a substantive of it by writing it out thus with hyphens between all its words. Nothing but this can possibly name its delicate idiosyncrasy. (William James, *Principles of Psychology*, I, p. 275-76)

I can imagine perceptual literacy, of which a poem is a model, as an experience of a series of verbal planes; the lines of a poem are characteristic forms of units of consciousness.

The desire to be literate beyond the terms of a discontinuous consciousness (or, the obverse of this, to be conscious beyond the limits of the verbal plane) may constitute the cathectic situation of the poem. The lyric impulse appears to seek to extend the continuity of consciousness.

In *The Guard*, I am forced to set the discontinuity of consciousness against the continuity of reality—always recognizing the independence of reality.

I continue to think about this in *The Person*, where one line says "Self-consciousness is discontinuous":

There is no time
for rewriting
my thoughts
are in my neck
Self-consciousness is discontinuous
The very word "diary" embarrasses me
There are schools of autobiography
far removed—into them

too, socialism hums
as mercury, spilled, splits
and is solid
The head is a case, with genitals
I laugh because things fit
This is the solace of fatalism
I distinguish it from non-literary reality
Anything that decomposes
rather than a person
into temporal rather than spatial parts
must be a person's life

And so on. In this part of *The Person*, the discontinuity of consciousness is felt as a pressure exerted by time. The last sentence means, among other things, that part of the anxiety elicited by the temporal is a fear of death.

But imagine addressing 'paradise' without a fear of death. The end of the first part of *The Guard* says:

The silence of the sensible horizon is intelligibly
awkward. The skin containing character.
Some things slip through the mesh
and others go rotten. Nothing
distresses me exactly.
I sleep with self-styled procrastination.
Whose next day I don't know personally.

* * *

They too live half in a shoe. (part 2)

This is an anxious moment.

There is more to the sentence, but just this much of it forms a single line placed at the end of a stanza, so that it is suspended. Two stanzas later the next step is taken: "And the other half in a shoe too." This line too occurs as the last line of a stanza, and it too is only the beginning of a longer sentence.

The two sentences are: "They too live half in a shoe / given to reticent outbursts / with something by heart not forgotten / but not unkindly refraining something" and "And the other half in a shoe too / inclined to agree, committed to paper, sensuous with superstition."

There is a degree of parallelism here, but not identity. The poem is proceeding in the form of alternating planes. Just prior to this I say, "My shadow fell / in the weedlot, parallel to world a"

* * *

You match your chair. (part 1)

To me, this is funny.

I think it was Bob Perelman who made such a comment to me one afternoon at San Francisco State, where we were sitting waiting for Carla Harryman and Alan Davies to give a reading, in the room where readings are always given there, which is gray and purple. As it turned out, almost everyone I knew in the room was wearing some shade of purple, and we all matched our chairs.

The concept of the match exceeds symmetry, which calls attention to the middle. What if one did indeed 'match' one's chair? What if one met other things with perfect (or hysterical) identity—in an unmediated, beatitudinous continuum?

Earlier I had been thinking about descriptive vocabularies, and about words as they match their things. But this sentence is about the odd vibration between one thing and another that is characteristic of funniness, or of the seriously comic.

Yurii Tynjanov, in *The Problem of Verse Language*, identifies three poetic signs: the principal sign (a word's primary meaning in its given context); the secondary sign (connotative nuances and 'semantic overtones'); and the oscillating sign (where two principal signs jostle for primacy, as in the pun). The comic employs oscillating signs.

The comic is only possible when one thing is seen in the light of another, when one thinks of two things at once. I, often being of two minds about things, laugh. "I laugh because things fit."

Conventionally it is said that the comic derives from disharmony, the unlikely, incongruous, or grotesque. But it may also be the result of the likely—which is what I mean by the 'match' or 'fit.' Perfect congruity is hilarious, as when event coincides with expectation.

In part 6, the passage which repeats what some animals and things 'say', half-translated and half-transliterated from a letter to me from Arkadii Dragomoshchenko in Russian, represents the construction of a comic stack and includes a certain amount of slippage.

... I tell you that cats 'say' mya-ew, mya-ew
dogs gav-gav, trains sheex-sheex-sheekh
(while whistling ta-tooo), roosters cry
coo-caw-reh-coo, frogs croak kva-kva, birds
in a flock sing fyou-eet, except ravens

which prefer karr-karrs, and the ducks quack kra
bells ring bom-bomm, and pigs grunt hryou-hryou
... but now, what is going on
with the neighbors through the wall?—not a sound
comes through—just as sometimes ... nothing can pass
through my skull, for example!

* * *

Mercy is psychological... . But justice is scientific.
(part 4)

Statements such as this are arrived at through intuited necessity, which is itself a form of extreme logic.

“When did you decide to be avant-garde?” This question was asked me by a student in a class to which I was speaking. There was no such decision (was my respectful answer to the ludicrous question), but only intuited necessity. And where there is no reason, no cause, but only necessity, then there is no moment.

* * *

It takes a very normal person to create a new picture.
(part 4)

This person revels in its education, to the degree that the education is afflicted with details. By that I mean that, in the general excitement, everything is repeatedly new, if not in itself, then in its composition. Its non-isolability restores and guarantees its newness. This is what I mean in the second part of the poem, where I say, “So sociable the influence of Vuillard” (I was thinking of the painted backgrounds), “so undying in disorder is order.”

After writing this, I had a dream, in which the poem was subjected to analysis as if it were a human mind. All that had been written was separated into logical units (that’s what they were called in the dream)—words, phrases, occasionally entire sentences, all units of consciousness—and these were divided algebraically by the letter N, which stood for a unit of normalcy. This fraction (poetic unit over unit of normalcy) equalled in my dream what was called Imagination. Poetry divided by normalcy is imagination. The equation was $\frac{\text{poem unit}}{N} = \text{Imagination}$.

Now, in the imagination, all flesh, all human flesh has been dead upon the earth for ten million, billion years... .

Every step once taken in the first advance of the human race, from the amoeba to the highest type of intelligence, has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded it the dead ages gone by. A perfect plagiarism results. Everything is and is new. Only the imagination is undeceived... .

Yes, the imagination, drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was... .

(William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, p. 93.)

This is the new picture, such as that which a very normal person makes. It captures the world.

NOTES ON *THE FIRST WORLD*

In a perceptive & friendly review of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* in *Poetics Journal* 5, David Lloyd characterized language-writing as an assault on grammar, referentiality, and narrative. Now you can only assault something that you're separate from. But as a writer I feel that I'm made up of grammar, referentiality, and narrative. If I look for language, in its pure state, "as such," it's in vain.

I don't find language, and I don't find the person. Instead I find monetary exchanges, buildings with price tags on them, plumbing, shampoo habits, in a word: history, not the abstraction, not the story, but a history made of acts & things. The absolute inwardness of the person is a chimera, based on ignoring certain details, like where hot water comes from.

CLIFF NOTES: LEMMING MUSIC

Because the languages are enclosed and heated
each one private a separate way
of undressing in front of the word window
faces squashing up against it
city trees and personal rituals of sanitation
washing the body free of any monetary transaction

Just like people, words in isolation develop delusions of grandeur, utopian hopes and pretensions get attached to them. Language, body, senses, act. The Formalists spoke of "laying bare the device." I think that what I'm laying bare is the idea of "laying bare." There are no simple "devices" to reveal, no pure language, or unmediated senses, or pure acts. I don't write language, or work with words, instead I find these thick social strands, multiplex hunks of rhetoric—I'm talking about "single words" and on up here—material & historical, tangled, attached ...

The parts of the machine take off their words and die away
in a description read to the senses
by the leftovers on TV that no one would think of eating

even in the very act of swallowing.

The would-be pure semiotician has already ingested Ed McMahon, Barbara Walters.

So, here, the senses are a contradiction: natural & semiotic. The body is private warm clean flesh and part of the social machine. Languages are the walls of privacy, erotic stripteases, voyeuristic windows.

I don't think writing will *solve* any of the contradictions of our civilization. But I do want it to make them more compact and obvious. So I can't say, like Ginsberg did almost 20 years ago, "I here declare the end of war!" There's a lot of war going on. Not that I don't admire parts of "Wichita Vortex Sutra" very much, I do, but I don't want to go all the way into the utopian fishbowl of language as pure, magic act.

It's these "very acts" that we must
Pay attention to the flatness of the screen now!
For it's this very flatness
that the frailty projected containment of the humanized body
is designed to be pinned to
by, naturally, forces outside our control.

The lines have a syntax. They're a progression, not a group. But more than in my two previous books of poems, *To the Reader* and *Primer*, here I'm finding more gaps & uncompletable sentences. (More examples of this later.) Rather than the "new sentence," as Ron Silliman has named it, I'm building a sentence-like, or paragraph-like gestalt, quasi-narrative, out of broken-off sentences, phrases. There're syntactic breaks, but a semantic plane, across which the meaning moves, snowballing over gaps.

(The next poem I'll read, "Person," will give you a good idea of this. The stanza I just read is a small example.)

But as the incompleteness grows more pronounced, I'm also using more repetition, deictics, speechlike elements which posit a co-presence of "speaker & listener," i.e., writer & reader. Internal frames grow out of the rhetoric & repetition: not an externally applied thematics.

It can't be the knobs' fault because this is back before knobs.
Rock ledges, laurel fumes, sacred fainting spells
later on in the very pictures written, this is back before the alphabet
the pictures of the rocks in the savant's eye
he's chained to these pictures by the sententious wriggle
of the buttocks two classes down, whose owner
can hardly speak, can't multiply, and stands there waiting for Plato

to have Socrates tell him he's only rhetoric.
But, as we know from Aristotle, Plato doesn't know any plots
he can only give orders, dipping himself diffidently into the material
signifier at the same time as the ripples he thinks he's thinking
into their roundness come back to haunt him in the form of crude
jokes about his square calves at unprestigious dinners. In fact he
looks a little like that table he's always using as an example.
Next come the Romans, and with them we first we the sky
artificial creation of scarcity of meaning
spread out over the proletariat as a visible economic ether.
You can look, but it costs.

We can still see traces
of the tracts where they lived
and can still understand their language
which consisted entirely of dirty jokes about money.
It's easy to clear away the froth of biology
with a few words
to reveal the naked postcard of ageless windwashed marble
holding still for recorded history.

"Internal frames" is not a precise usage, but what I'm pointing to are such things as the mock-history (true history) of sex & philosophy, which grows out of the didactic tone of "It's these very acts that we must / Pay attention to the flatness of the screen now!" and the repetition of "very."

What I'm working towards here is to reinforce both perceptibility and, in quotes, "perceptibility," the contingency of perception. I mean, hopefully, the clean, money-free body at the beginning and the naked postcard of culture at the end are more than just a conceptual, thematic rhyme. I want their emphasized "clarity" to reveal itself as a reification, a false picture. I want the body & culture to mutually impossibilize each other as separable entities.

Not that I'm "not trying to say anything." But these clear pictures that are so readily available to our so-called consciousnesses are static & hypnotic. I want to say that.

Next poem: "Person." If the image of Ronald Reagan or Barbara Walters is a person, a lot of Shiites and Nicaraguans and inhabitants of Soweto don't get to be persons. Outside of the charmed narratives of Mastercard and Salvation, there's just this vale of tears, a giant slag heap of narrative waste.

PERSON

Eats, drinks, sticks pipe in mouth and asks

What society (books on varnished desk, vanished races, where have I
smelled that smell before I was born, a kind of hard-headed
pragmatism standing in the empty spaces ...
What society has ever not fashioned a human
receptacle for its narrative wastes?
C'est la guerre the garage the riding mower
the obtrusive stories that don't stop when the sun goes down all at
once like a physical short story
low blood sugar lowering the rate of vocabulary utilization
the world the universe the mind of god cushioning the fall of the dead
letter
water coming into the river from an unknown source.
Sometimes you just have to lie down with the unnamed by-products.

The poem's own relation to narrative is thorny. If I'm remembering correctly, this poem resulted from the tensions in the title. I started thinking about the word "person": so impersonal, problematic, almost a hoax, but so obvious, I myself for instance ... The rest "followed," after a lot of revision and finally a trip to bathroom of the Hi-Fi softserve icecream stand in Cloverdale, where I saw the graffiti that concludes the poem. The narrative in the poem proceeds by a mix of reaction and relaxation. When the level of reaction was high, things get quite jumpy.

They have no names, not because people are stupid
but because there's no place on the tray to put all the slides.
Plus the fact that food is fashion and thus
bites the hand that eats it
or, to put it differently
the Great Salt Flats are the thighs of what conceivable being
the wood from whose Proust no contractor
no matter how liberal the building codes
glass houses conceived in sin from day one
blizzards of chance down on the fountain of youth
all without a verb
because capitalism makes nouns
and burns the connections.

Syntactic jumping, quite self-reactive (for instance, at one point, I noticed I wasn't using any verbs), but, like I say, the semantic push is fairly steady. By the end of the stanza what's in evidence is a capitalistic landscape of nouns and unnamed by-products, where connection is discouraged. (As in no unions.)

I don't want to burn the connections. I don't want to mime the culture.

Words get forced, like the fugitive in *The 39 Steps*
into making a speech about what? ending in cheers with the speaker in
handcuffs.

And in fact one's own crudely physical body has never been in this
second before, it's less likely than it looks, imagine a TV growing
legs and talking, if a TV could talk we wouldn't understand it.

The reified narratives of our culture, like the TV shows, are giant nouns,
hypnotically clear and present. But behind the clarities are real killings.

The intimate journal protects its secrets.

The intimate flesh projects its secrets.

In the bathroom: Kill a (Jew crossed out) Nazi.

Next poem: "Speeches to a City No Larger Than the Reach of a Single
Voice." The title refers to Plato ideal-sized city, one that's phonocentric. This
appeals to me because I write sound, which is directly political, taking place in
the present. Our own culture is indirectly phonocentric, too, but in an atomized
sense: walkmen & images of the great communicator in the living room.

In the first stanza, we have the Modernist: an engineer, precise, map-
making, slave-driving, originary-classicist, piloting his trireme "forever":

One says: My method involves
causing my impervious bucket
in a very real way, to enter a particular wave
in a particular place, so that the aperture
admits exactly enough water to fill the interior
bucket as sentence, with the handle, handle as readership
chained to the benches of the galley
by my earlier terminological conquests
of the formerly merely wet ocean
now charted, drawn & quartered, so that
my trireme is as if self-propelled
and is, in a very real way, unsinkable.

Opposed to this one is the beautiful, slight, pathetic Adonis, the eternally
momentary Romantic:

The other says: I have no method.
I merely undress in powerful moonlight
delighting the wretched few

and plunge in and drown each time.

And slaloming serenely out from this dialectical impasse/impulse comes the “I” (I hope no one will think that I’m “I”): a textbook post-Modernist: eclectic, bathed in media, awash in commodities that come from plundering other countries & classes:

I say: I turn to *Dallas*, to baseball, to Prince, sushi, fractals
—note the intrusive plane of explanation
tied up finally in some diplomatic pouch of noncombatant pro-life pro-
choice pre-ontology movie-like stasis—I mean
a person, in quotes, on earth, quotes
sited in the aporia of toilet paper in Nicaragua
of jobs in Youngstown, if you don’t already own the shopping center
then go shopping, which is why in the later afternoon on
weekdays, after the heat of the searing sexual repression and age
war of midday has abated, and the talk shows have grown cool and
delightfully empty with discussions of kitchens and embarrassing
moments
which allows the viewer to go out and turn
theory into practice, in short
to rule the world
until the news at six enacts the State ...
And now I see that some enchanter has spoken my words.

I’m thrown off balance by that last line. I’ve thought to drop it, and thus leave intact the analysis of Oppression-by-the-State into Hypnosis-by-the-Media (See Steve McCaffery’s “And Who Remembers Bobby Sands?” in *Poetics Journal* 5). The “I” here “starts anywhere”—the beginning of the stanza was quite automatic and then proceeded by crisscrossed self-conscious reflection—but somehow by the end the analysis reaches clarity: the news at six does enact the State. But it’s a clarity that’s aimless & static: what good does it do?

No “I” is going to reach any useful kinds of clarity, especially not while “critically” watching TV.

Nor, as the following poem suggests, will any single reader perceive “Truth”; the conditions of separation reading involves are too powerful:

WE

We have come here today to be plural
sit in rows or sprawl
in the wind-tunnel of design competition

to find out how many a dollar will buy
eyes focused on the spinning disk, the picture.

Everyone is singular
impersonating corn gods, matching colors
mating, prying apart the lifestyle
of the class above
detached priests, angels with wings of erotic syntax.

Have we agreed on the plot?
Apparently not.
The stories get squashed: colorless incomprehensible bits dehydrating
on Consumer's tray
or they grow larger than life: day
after day of Reagan's sense of humor.

We get left off in Afghanistan
that solemn trysting place of the advanced ascetic journalist.
A woman, of indefinite age, dressed as Truth, is seen (note the passive),
veiled
coming down a long winding dusty path
so slowly that, some centuries, she seems
not to advance at all (please turn to page 37)

My answer to the Committee for Accuracy in Media.

I want to keep insisting on the contingencies that writing involves. One is class. In my sarcastic, self-transparent categories, we have "wings of erotic syntax" above, and "the sententious"—i.e., rhetorical—"wriggle of the slave's buttocks" below. Even in a poem like the following, where near the end there's a very emphatic sense of the generative rush language can provide, the end itself slashes across that with a fact from a quite different order:

GROWING UP

The little devil is happy swinging on the gates of Hell
and I have only to hear myself say "Sit down and eat"
to hear the hinges creak
oiled with the human integer
raised to the highest power.

Next to the gate, a stream is running
always a little further on and

there's always water to drink and a dry throat
because the hellish mistake the historicized body
the dividing mind the newspaper hat the sunnysideup president
Stand back! Get some water somebody! He's fainted or faking or
painted.

And you thought battleships meant jobs.
And thought meant classrooms and you and tedious
romance after hours, beer on the stereo
all the illegible ills schizophrenia spells
on capitalism's know-nothing body.

Like "bulwark" in sci-fi spaceships
there is "process" and "structure"
and "an obscure desire to run one's finger round the rim of the teacup in
time to the eternal return of Bastille Day."

And there is, and here
the list came on like puberty, silent and internally enormous
fallen from some great height
and the devil felt a roar of benevolence rushing through the veins of his
forehead as his instincts mated, each with its word, like a mass
Moonie wedding, only the God of State had fallen apart, and the
cisterns, pipes, aquaducts, barns, cribs were full, and earth was
matter, running water, people, asleep possibly, or amused by their
non-narrative bodies.

It was like talking, the whole language at once, it *was* talking, myself,
say anything and I scatter.

Helicopter shadow rides up the side of the apartment house.

I'm working against transcendence. (That's the name of the sculpture in the
plaza of the Bank of America Building in San Francisco.)

"SUPPOSE NOISES HAD A SPECIAL NAME"

But they don't and General Vessey leading cheers
of "Hurray for God!" is proof.

Far back in the brain, the hot line, alight with sentiments of
tyrannosaurus and tank munching straight through graphs of time
connecting to the other on the other end, who doesn't answer.

Third person in Arabic grammar = the absent one.

Human bits of bread and the repressed wages
of work and sound, bodies contain enough silence to break
the circular tunes caught by camera and held
outside the frame as they walk to elections
rigged under cover of the big book, which will leave you & me out,
always
in the name of the absent one.

At this point let me introduce Derrida's statement: "The absence of a transcendental signified stretches the play of signification to infinity." My translation: "God is dead, so any word can mean everything." But Derrida has just switched the transcendence to the other side: he's made words his god. It reminds me of atomic power's early boast: that it would provide power too cheap to meter. "Meaning will be everywhere on that glorious day. All you'll have to do is run your finger lightly and playfully across the texture of the want ads ..."

Short stories, hierarchies of address, slide shows, Proust, building codes, movies, TV, journals, graffiti—these systems are far from being endless oceans whose surfaces, placid as a lake above a calendar, stretch to infinity shivering in a never-ending jouissance to the dance of the signifying ripples. That image is just the reflection of privileged positions of control. Such systems interact, add up in complex historical ways that kill some people, while enabling others to live. These things *count*.

LET'S SAY

A page is being beaten
back across the face of "things."
Inside me there's a little book of no color, its pages riffing as I
breathe, a moving point, torn out
and I read this scrapbook of desire
let's not say constantly
asleep & provoked by the economics of cliffs, galleys, cartoons,
explosive devices patterned to look like adults reading signs
casually, very fast
and in this wind, leavened by sun
or am I merely reading that
backwards, inside the restaurant where they serve the parts
by number, innuendo
and the you and the I spends its life
trying to read the bill
alone in the dark

big wide streets lined with language glue

Here, the continual reification of language—books, scrap-books, menus, neon signs—feels violent. Whereas speech can feel like a kind of orgy, tho here the orgy is couched in terms of pulp:

A page is being written.
It's fun to chew, to work things out
to close the damn book
to sit in the sand with a radio
no bikini no tan line no body
a dream matchup
you can either go in or out, no middle ground
the floor is sexualized, tessellated with little languages crying out speak
me, squash me, love me up into one libidinous hunk of noise, you
great big missing other, yoo hoo, over here
and the finished word is an album of past pleasures
smoking out one last incomprehensible nuance beside still waters
that talk their talk
of which you are the noun
the one & only
and the model breaks, leaving
a nasty little landscape which *you*
and the group of course
the other the slaughtered city the strafed farms
silently
in large heated buildings
the smell means money
and the classics are being straddled
a page is being beaten
O parse me, says the son to the so-called absent father
in a suit by the lakefront in Cleveland
sixty degrees and a fishing pole
the breeze or am I reading water again

The reader and the writer, "the you and the I," are such languages transforming into pulp languages, non-languages and back, degraded, exploded, overburdened systems of public & private address. There's no inner escape from our environment, where such powerful emblems of coercion as USA TODAY constantly conflate the initials U.S. with their editorial staff and with "us," so that "we" read that "we" are buoyed by the progress of the Salvadoran army or that "we" are attending more ballgames than ever this summer.

In face of this and millions of other like facts, it's tempting to posit the communicatory circle as an answer, with all validity inhering in the incorruptibly local circuit of you & I in real time. The following poem yields a bit to that, I think—exchange being, if not an answer, a place to start.

THE BROKEN MIRROR

From the stately violence of the State
a classic war, World War Two, punctuated by Hiroshima
all the action classically taking place on one day
visible to one group in invisible terms
beside a fountain of imagefree water
“trees” with brown “trunks” and “leafy” green crowns
50s chipmonks sitting beneath, buck teeth representing
mental tranquillity, they sit in rows
and read their book and the fountain gushes forth
all the letters at once, permanently
a playful excrescence, an erotic war against nature.

And here's a check for five feet of shelf
in the life-after-death book club, seminar upon seminar
grains of sand the tan body rests on
glorious huge & hypothetical
worth all the bad press human sacrifice has received.

Outside, masses of angry numb matter blow against the symphonic
angles of the citadel, warm & witty with electronically modulated
voice, the earnest look out of the sweater, microphone hidden
casually in memory, clouds a diversified portfolio of sensation.
The pictured body is relaxed & smooth
on the unmade bed, maple syrup, the waffle drenched
not a sentence, a way of life, the way out.

But I don't want to have to recreate the very ground of being
it's supposed to create me, like it said it did already
intelligibility aside, monumentality of social decay aside
food & water & explanations of hierarchies to last a lifetime
aside, out of the way, out to a lunch of human bit parts broken under
the State.

I don't want to improvise, in a foreign language
my own, but in the wrong mouth, my own
a parody of my mostly silent dreams, I don't want to

—I'm melting, all my lovely inwardness—make love
to the middle of the World Bank's picture of a person.

Let language, that sports page of being
mystify its appearance in all speech writing thought tonight
so that the thing, that object of burnished flirtation
can smuggle out the self, that drill bit ...

But why am I contracting for the construction of this life-like place-like
spilling-over lived-in
if only for a moment or memory-shape, since readwriting is a mirror
backward at best, of prior intent
while you sit before me (note the you-as-I circuit, banquet with masses
of flowers, choirs, cranial blooms lit up, sacred, edible)

I'll close with "Oedipus Rex." Here, I think, the play generated itself out
from the tension between the first two words, "extinct cities." Suddenly, in line
four, Kreon and the royal we appeared and I found myself writing one of the
originary classics of Western literature. It was Fate.

Kreon, later in the poem, speaks from the position of a dour transcendent
condemnation, representing the voice of God. But when he first speaks, he's
quite "out of character." Similarly, oppositely, Oedipus starts out being the
character Oedipus, but by the end he's saying things much like those I myself
might say, if I were to describe where & when I live.

OEDIPUS REX

Extinct cities, their driven people still visible
in old sounds, I'll have to make this brief, time
to go, birds flying south, I'm double parked, here
comes Kreon now, just as we are mentioning him.
What news, ancient uncle, from the transcendental desktop?

KREON: The people, hemmed in by liberal playgrounds
and rightwing communication systems, are dead
or dying. No one's complaining, mind you, but with the inauguration
just hours away the sky seems to be crumbling, and the decibel
level in some stadiums is below that of Mallarmé's tomb.
God thought you should know.

OEDIPUS: Tell god that I've got a family and long hours
of being myself to consider, how to explain things

so that meals don't degenerate into chaos and we eat
each other, like your nation states.

It would be like nuclear winter to me if I couldn't support my family
with the sheer flexible power of my separated words.

KRE: God wants you to die.

OED: Tell God that my desires are infinite, if unfit
for human consumption. Sense perception
is a thing of the past. Myths spill over
into the present. I'm one
with the machines that go boom in the night.

You may be a mere bureaucratic bug in the rug, a sad hole with an
abstract smile coming home to roost on your obsessed statue
but I've got a problematic nest egg of involuntary memory, I remember
most of my old girlfriends, personal stuff, priceless, but not so
very interesting to you or God or anyone else. So finally
I'm just going to say no
to physical forces, matter, and predestination.

KRE: Since you're going to die, God wants to see you repent.

OED: You can reprint any of my old speeches
but I doubt that God will be able to tell them apart from anything
anyone else ever said.

I think I'll just stand pat.

I never meant to soliloquize, but since the government's gotten so big
& secret, any jerk with an open mouth's in the center of an
infinitely expanding universe of gloom & doom, each sound that
comes out, even if it's just asking where there's a bathroom
downtown, contains lonely world-shattering forces, Magellanic
clouds, hot winds to obliterate all human obstruction.

But keeping silent just subsidizes television.

And the past is so addictive, it takes longer and longer ...

It all turns into a story, like my body ...

BRUCE ANDREWS

REVIEW

NEVER WITHOUT ONE

New York: Roof Books

by Diane Ward

Nerves focus, deference to time, electrical body, the power-source oxygen explodes. Facts start up, irresistible collision of non-solids lightens any proverb. Mechanism, or the borders deflected, language, partners, an imagination habit, hands convention evaporates. Facts begin to scale senses, pleasure. Lines of sight, imprints rotate, criss-cross, music forecloses on the initials. Will tell you what's on. Eye by eye, jeopardy equivocates, distance splicing the brain together, misdemeaning, braille, climate, proof; clutch and brake. Meanings heat up, maps transact, costumes, from the inside—counterpunching privacy holds us captive = slang, drawn neon, gestural thinking, the basic outside, controlled distortion, who are the suspects? Reverie emblems, binocular heart doubt abbreviation; facts value the pronoun armor. Voltage given irretrievable speech. Time-lapse reprograms everything.

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