

Commentaries on Silliman's Blog (and other subjects)

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Silliman on Lowell

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I've been meaning for some time to offer a more thorough critique of Silliman's blog but haven't had the time. After all, he writes so much, using some terms developed over a few weeks or even months, that I figure one would have to print out at least 30 or so pages worth to give the appearance that I am being comprehensive, moderately impartial, and respectful of the breadth of the work I am considering.

Unfortunately, I don't find these qualities very visible on his own blog, which is rather famously knee-jerk, even reactionary, in its judgments, and wears its partisanship on its sleeve. This, I gather, is one of the glories of blogs, that it usually contains writing that is off the top of one's head, a bit raw, and hence more vulnerable to contradiction, open for debate. At least, I think that it is – miles away from the objective tone that is a necessity in academic writing (and that Bourdieu criticized so effectively in such books as the *Logic of Practice* and *Pascalian Meditations*, the mastery of which he associated with becoming part of a secular clergy of intellectuals).

But this does leave open the possibility that a blog writer can claim to have written something quickly and hastily and thereby duck the arrows of a critical reader who might question the terms embedded in the judgments found there, not to mention the value system behind it. I fear that part of Silliman's overabundance of production is to avoid any such critical appraisal, but when I think that, I remind myself that Ron has always been a "good sport" about these sorts of critiques, and in fact invites them, even if he appears a little deaf to their implications.

Conveniently, his most recent post, a very brief one on Robert Lowell, contains in microcosm much of what I distrust about his blog, and indeed about the general trajectory of discussion about this apparent cultural divide in United States poetry. You can read the post in its entirety at his blog; I'll quote rather liberally however in order to let the resonances of his writing have its own play. He starts:

Whenever I feel too completely dismissive of Robert Lowell, I think of Bob Grenier. Grenier studied with Lowell at Harvard &, I believe, it was Lowell who helped Grenier get into the Writers Workshop at Iowa City even as the triumvirate of Creeley, Zukofsky & Stein were beginning to render Grenier opaque to the Brahmin crowd back in the Bay State.

There is already a lot assumed in this first paragraph. One of the more bizarre, however, is this surprise that Lowell would have any appreciation of Creeley, Zukofsky and Stein – the Boston Brahmins, after all, produced John Wheelright, one of the strangest writers of the century, and Lowell himself was related, of course, to Amy Lowell, who was a radical in her own way if not a great writer. I've only been lukewarm about

Zukofsky myself — one of the most emotionally frigid writers I've read — which doesn't mark me, I hope, as provincial.

What is really happening is that there is an assumption that, because the "tradition" or "lineage" to Grenier is beginning to ally himself is occluded, then one could never in fact read his poetry — as if a reader of Grenier's poetry in the "Bay State" had simply never seen Futurism or Cubism, never saw or read the poetry of Rimbaud, Marinetti or Williams, never read Woolf, Faulkner or Joyce, never heard of Stravinsky or John Cage, etc. (This lineage issue — nothing is more important than protecting the lineage to RS, and nothing more nefarious to BKS — reappears below.)

Does one say that William Burroughs is an obscure writer because nobody understands his lineage in the Marquis de Sade and Lautreamont? We know this is not true — he's not an obscure writer but quite famous, and even Asian Americans — who, by RS's logic, are part of a "class" to which Zukofsky or Lautreamont would presumably also be "opaque" because they don't "tell their stories" — have read him (and Grenier) with pleasure.

What in fact happens is that one grasps the writing with what one knows; not getting it exactly right is usually quite fine in an appreciation of art, and in fact should be encouraged. Brazilians, after all, have to read also, and we read their poetry without any understanding of their "lineages."

Lastly, Creeley, by many standards, is not such an unusual writer — there's as much Herrick as Zukofsky in anything he writes, and he is quite conservative in subject matter. Even when he is being more pointillist he fits into some sort of "let it be" vibe that doesn't strike me as alien to middle class mores — when I last visited Germany, for instance, he was one of the few American poets I saw frequently translated. To wave him around as some influence rendering a poet culturally "opaque" strikes me as absurd. What is "opaque" is his "lineage" in the Objectivist tradition — but so what?

You can still find vestiges of Lowell's influence, though, in Grenier's first book, *Dusk Road Games: Poems 1960-66*, published by Pym-Randall Press of Cambridge, Mass.:

On the lawns before the brown House
on the hill above the city
the wheeled sick sit still in the sunshine —

I'm not sure what the Lowell influence is here — is it the alliteration of "sick sit still" in the third line (which, in isolation, seems like a nascent Grenier poem itself — hence, a "good" influence)? Is it the presence of the sick themselves (Lowell being, of course, the "confessional" poet who made his reputation on writing about his experiences in insane asylums)? Lowell would never have written a line as bland as "on the

hill above the city" — it fails even as revelatory plainness. And like Dylan Thomas, he's often baroque or nothing, or when "plain" just simply much sharper. (One of the qualities that Perloff recognizes in her book on him is his attempt to make every word "visible" as a thing — she relates this tendency, I think, to Marinetti, but "we" would relate it to the Objectivists — yes, miscegenation at work.)

One hopes it's not the "transparency" of the language, the old bugbear of Language poets, as if any poem that attempts to record any visual sensation were influenced by Lowell — one could just as easily say it was influenced by Wordsworth or Chaucer. But of course, there is no partisan charge in doing so.

I can hear some Lowell in these lines — there's a poem of his that starts "Tamed by Milltown, we lie in mother's bed / the rising sun in [something something, war-paint?] dyes us red." etc. Well, I can't remember it. But it's a poem that attempts to get the ball rolling with an image — we are, after all, all in the "imagist" tradition (I *do* believe that most American poets are imagists of some sort) — which is very Lowellian, as is the internal rhyme "hill" and "still" right on the crests of the rather heavy rhythm.

Anyway, we could have benefited here from an understanding of how this poem reflects Lowell and not a hodge-podge of other writers who uses these techniques.

Lowell turns up again as an influence in the "conservative" portion of Hank Lazer's remarkable *Doublespace: Poems 1971-1989*, his attempt to bridge the gulf between Le School d' Quietude & post avant poetics. One of Marjorie Perloff's first books was her 1973 *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*.

Didn't Lowell already "attempt to bridge the gulf" by writing *Life Studies*, which, famously, he rewrote in a non-blank verse form after having been impressed with the style of Allen Ginsberg? And aren't a handful of Lowell's sonnets devoted to his visits with Williams and Pound? Didn't Lowell defend Pound when he was turned down for the Bollingen Prize for the *Pisan Cantos*?

I don't think one "bridges a gulf" by including one's early poems (note the time span in the title) and later poems in the same book — one attempts to write differently than one did when younger, but where is the "attempt" in collecting these poems? I've never seen Lazer's book, but my guess is that the "conservative portion" is very different from what I presume is the hip, "avant-garde" half — if so, then has anything been "bridged" — isn't there, then, a gap *created* in such a book? *Life Studies* becomes more of a "bridge" — there is no "conservative" or "avant-garde" portion to that book, but a new style that is a synthesis of his older, Latinate blank-verse and the looser, diaristic manner of his prose.

I've had Lowell books on my shelf since I was 16 and I've never thrown them away, nor do I keep a "gap" between his books and those of the "avant-garde." I have books by Berryman, Bishop, Jarrell — the entire "school of quietude" — and it's not ren-

dered me unable to read Debord or the “radical” side of Williams, nor have they ill-prepared me to read Bruce Andrews (anyone seeing my first book will see that influence there) or Lyn Hejinian — who, it must be pointed out, is rather quietudinous in temperament herself.

So I ask again, in respect to the clannishness of Ron, not to mention many Language poets, when considering issues of “linage” — where is this huge “gulf”? Does the publication of Doublespace make Hank Lazar the Jackie Robinson of poetry? Who has he liberated by bridging this “gulf”?

(My second book is called *Gulf*, and in fact some of what I tried to deal with there is this perceived gap — but I’ll spare you the gory details.)

But what always gets in the way of any possible admiration I might have for Lowell is his poetry. When it was first published in 1946, *Lord Weary’s Castle* — that title alone tells you everything about literary allegiances —

This was a jaw-dropper. The title of that book reminds me of cover of the paperback edition of *The Gormenghast Trilogy*, or maybe of the *Lord of the Rings* — is this the literary “allegiance” that he is transmitting? If it was called *Mr. Roger’s Donut Shop*, would we think him “of the people” and a capitalist? Or *Liberace’s Ashram* — would we “out” Lowell as a gay Buddhist? Does a book called “The Age of Huts,” signify an allegiance to the Pueblos? I still have to figure out what a “literary allegiance” is — is there an oath involved? (If so, can I break it?)

was read, rightly, as a turn away from any poetics of direct speech, not only anti-Williams & the polyglot circus of Pound’s *Cantos*, but even anti-Frost & anti-Auden. For the New Critics, the conservative agrarian poets who were at that same moment consolidating their hold on English departments across the United States & beginning to wonder about their legacy, Lowell was an affirmation of their larger program. It didn’t hurt that he was a Lowell, either. By the time he was 30, Lowell had already won the Pulitzer Prize and had a photo spread in *Life Magazine*.

I’d like to see some back up here — who was doing this “reading”? How does “The Drunken Fisherman,” which starts “Wallowing in this bloody sty / I cast for fish that pleased my eye,” one of the poems in that book, or “A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” a great poem and as redolent of Melville as anything in Olson, represent an “anti-direct speech” stance?

The poems in this book, many of which are tortured and mannered, are overly determined by Lowell’s background in the classics and his need to see irony in all details of history, but I don’t see how this is “anti” anything — if anything, they are a direct con-

tinuation of Pound's imagism in the early *Cantos* (Lowell's main attraction for me, in fact, is his sharp eye for detail) not to mention the method of historical "rhymes" (Lowell's later sonnets—collected in a book called *Notebook*—what does *that* title tell you of allegiances—are a "circus" if anything. As there's never been a truly polyglot "post avant garde" American poet, I don't think he needs defense there).

They also reflect the influence of Hart Crane—a great all-American poet who happily read French poetry, wrote in a highly stylized manner and was even politically correct, being "anti" Eliot even as he was impressed with the form. But he was also "anti-direct speech," presumably—where do we put him? One of Lowell's best sonnets was about him, and even heroicized his homosexuality—betrayal of his Brahmin instincts?

Pound, of course, is as "anti-direct speech" as any poet who wrote—his translation of *The Seafarer*, for instance, is more impenetrable than the original must have been for the Anglo-Saxons (and, consequently, is a forerunner to some of the heavy alliterative style of *Lord Weary's Castle*); outside of *Cathay* and a handful of haiku-like things, he rarely wrote outside of a very lugubrious "mask" in his early poems, and the most "direct speech" aspect of his *Cantos* are those sections where he's making fun of blacks and Jews (I'm exaggerating, of course, but it's true that the only time he really gets into "speech" is during the "satirical" parts—which he had no gift for).

Lord Weary's Castle doesn't, of course, reflect the influence of Williams, but very few poets did in those days—it was published in 1946, and I don't think that Williams was appreciated enough at the time to have spurned an antithetical movement (imagining a "poetics of direct speech" to find its roots in WCW, as RS does elsewhere). Lowell's debt to Williams was very apparent by his last book, *Day by Day*, and he wrote appreciative essays on Paterson and *The Desert Music* (his buddy, Jarrell, wrote a great essay on WCW for the *Selected Poems*).

Consequently, suggesting that Lowell was some poster boy for the agrarian Right—the "larger program" I suppose—is a bit dishonest, and contradicted by fact. Lowell campaigned for Democratic presidential candidates and was a friend of the Kennedys; he was a conscientious objector in WWII and active as a protester during Vietnam. I wish I could go on about his politics but I don't know that much about his biography—these are the famous facts—but, alas, the implication that he was "quiet" and supporting an ascendant Right during these times is not fair, not to mention untrue.

("That he was a Lowell" make these political alliances and activities more, not less, brave, if we are to believe that the Brahmins are as provincial and hidebound as RS would have it. They would have been brave had his name been Seigenthaler, Torres or Tanaka as well.)

Yet Lowell, especially the early Lowell, is seldom a good poet for more than two or three lines at a time, which invariably are buried in larger lugubrious mono-

logs that do little more than show a man unable to actually get to his own writing through his presumptions about “what poetry should be.”

This is, in fact, wrong. First of all, he famously revised incessantly, which hardly reflects a dogmatic attitude toward what a poem “should be.” Lowell’s idea that a poem is “never done” and that it can exist in two different published forms – both equally “final” – is a more radical contention than the idea that the Alphabet (for example) will be collected in a single volume one day in a final state – a “monument” for all time. It’s practically an avant-garde stance, an indeterminacy regarding language and an author’s intentions that exists well past the page – it’s practically Blanchot from the *Gaze of Orpheus*, in which the left hand is that which edits the right. (I often think of Lowell, especially early Lowell, as the best American approximation of the classically formed, but highly indeterminate, Symbolism of Mallarmé and Valéry, which is why I am never bothered when I don’t understand what he’s trying to “say.”)

This practice of letting two versions of a poem co-exist even conflicts with the Bourdieuan notion that an author’s death is the final period on his or her life’s work – as if an author dies with a sort of purpose, to package the *oeuvre* for history. To leave a poem in two or more final states seems an active contradiction of this sort of vanity (unlike *other* ways of arranging one’s work – winky winky).

Consequently, when, as Lowell did, a poet changes styles and approaches to writing several times in his or her lifetime – as painter Philip Guston did in his, to point to the most obvious example – it demonstrates a questioning of what poetry (or art) “should be,” not a dogma. My sense, frankly, is that Lowell changed his sense of “what poetry should be” with more frequency than RS has, if that means anything – after all, the *New Sentence* still hovers over, even justifies, the most recent writings of RS more strongly than *Lord Weary’s Castle* hovers over or justifies *Life Studies* or the later, very speech based *Day by Day*. I guess it’s ok to have “allegiances” and “presumptions” so far as they are the right ones. (My preference, of course, is for skepticism about both issues).

(And what does Ron have against “lugubrious monologs” – I thought this was the blogger’s MO?)

It is precisely that should be, the sense of obligation to a dead aesthetic inherited from a mostly imaginary British Literary Heritage, that I take to be behind David Antin’s famous line “if robert lowell is a poet i don’t want to be a poet,” a sentiment that was virtually universal among the poets I knew in the 1960s & ’70s.

I could go on about my feelings about Antin’s writing about Lowell – I read one of those essays in Kostelanetz’s anthologies years ago and thought it longwinded and misguided – but I’ll have to refrain for time’s sake. Again, though, the “should be” is

implicit in nearly everything Ron writes — is it the “should be” we are questioning or the *what* it “should be”?

RS’s ideas about American literary tradition vs. a “dead” “aesthetic” “inherited” from “Britain” have always been so absurd to me that I don’t feel, for the moment, that I can comment on it without sliding into diatribe. But frankly, only if one believed that culture were produced — in reading and writing — entirely by sycophants with no critical acumen would one fear the influence of the productions of a particular country, not to mention time. This sentence has curious echoes of Donald Rumsfeld in it — the “Old Europe” business — or, worse, something out of the Balkans — we call this strategy of battling prejudices “Balkanization” after all. So I’ll let it pass.

Still, in 1964, on a week when Time magazine could have focused on the aftermath & implications of the first Harlem riots of the decade, it chose instead to feature Lowell on its cover.

Again, the idea that Lowell was “in” with the power — and the suggestion that he had anything to do with a media cover-up of the Harlem riots! I’m quite sure that Chomsky would not have complained about Lowell being on the cover of *Time* (that is, if Chomsky had anything at all to say about the salutary effects *Time* magazine). Well, I’m not sure why RS’s post ends with this particular sour note — I thought the issue was the poetry itself, as the last paragraph started to state?

I’ll reserve my conclusions for later — time’s a-wastin’ — further spelling corrections to come...

The "Third Way", etc.

July 04, 2003

This is in response to something Kasey wrote on his blog, which includes at the moment writing by both him and Michael Magee that is worth reading if you have any interest in this debate:

My sense is: so much as you permit there being "two ways," there will have to — especially for a good Hegelian — be a third way. But if one lives in a universe of heterogeneous (however provisional) wholes coming in conflict with each other at all points, none with *compelling* claims to be more ascendant than others (this is, of course, possible), then these "thirds" will always themselves be provisional, and are if anything aids to thinking. (If these "claims" *are* compelling, then the "third ways" tend to have a revolutionary aspect to them — as it might have in England when Pound was there — performing what might be the function of a "second" or "other" way. It's obviously most salient when a language — such as Italian — is being used for the first time to perform in fashions usually reserved for other languages, in this example, Latin. We have no such divide right now unless someone were to attempt a poem or novel in Black American English — far as I know.)

If one were to put on a small books shelf Pierre Guyotat's *Eden Eden Eden*, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and William Burrough's *Naked Lunch*, then put — on the other side of the bookshelf — Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* and even — for kicks — the collected Robert Frost or the Amy Lowell of "Patterns" — her exploitation of the idea of "imagism" — you could probably place most Language poetry somewhere in between. Language poetry often has the reproducibility of form that one associates with the latter writers — one hits upon something and is able to exploit it for an impressive duration — with the modernist charge of the former — desperate acts of creation often involving ephemerality and "failure" — but in neither case entirely sacrifices a claim to "realism" entirely (at least among the Americans, who can often recuperate their work into a philosophy of pragmatism), nor to a secure position in relation to national norms of discourse (i.e. what is not allowed to be said). I.e. the very functionality of the method seems to preclude there being as negative a charge as might occur in a neo-romantic vein (whether our neo-romantic be Rimbaud, Kafka or Beckett — and these are hardly Romantics!).

I'm being schematic here (and maybe confusing), but certainly, much of RS's writing will tend toward the side of autobiographical, and more or less dispassionate, social realists than it will on the side of the fiery or oddball, truly "negative" writing of the formal innovators. This doesn't make it "bad" writing — I'm a fan of much of his work, obviously, just look at /ubu — but because a formal technique is being employed (in his case the "new sentence," which never, frankly, struck me as radical) hardly spares a poem (such as his tiring, distracted Roof book "N/O") from being branded as

passive – about language, about society, about issues of epistemology and genre. What can be more “quietudinous” than a passivity regarding these issues? In comparison, the tortured, jagged, compressed rhythms of Lowell’s “The Skunk Hour” come off as punk rock.

I don’t think any Language poet with the exception of Bruce Andrews (and maybe Bernstein and Watten) has taken the project of the evisceration of national social (or linguistic) mores to the same extremes that the great French tradition (or anti-tradition) of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautreamont, Jarry, the Situationists (Guyotat is often identified as one of them), etc. – not to mention predecessors Rousseau or de Sade. Most Language writing looks quite polite and “healthy” in comparison, at least from this perspective – the Protestant ethic of the good work done daily in order to “make it new” appears as a subprogram of much of this writing. This is not a statement about American poetry as a whole – that’s more complex – or all of Language poetry – the fragmentary nature of Bernstein’s early and middle-period writing seems to me attentive to this ethics of failure, of anti-systemicity, in “hot” modernism – but oddly, someone like Plath occupies a more critical space – there with Ginsberg and Burroughs – than one would think. There is an “out on a limb” aspect to what she was trying to do that is impressive to me, and her later method doesn’t strike me as less “radical” than that of, say, Rae Armantrout – quite the contrary, in fact.

When I hear about a truly national debate (or maybe a good essay by Christopher Hitchens) about the unquietudinous-ness of Language poetry then I will be impressed – so far, it has not happened. There’s nothing wrong with this, of course, I just don’t understand how one can point to a “lineage” in one’s writing as somehow conferring a badge on a writer as being on the good side of a – presumed, but in my mind quite “imaginary” – literary divide. To suggest Language poets as somehow sweating in the trenches and other poets not – categorically – strikes me as nonsense. And it always seems to involve the rather limited purview of “American” writing – observing how the two principled, dueling Scots, MacDiarmid and Finlay, came to a rapprochement at the end of the former’s career should be illustrative of where the future – for “us” – lies. Much of this won’t matter: the 1200 pages of *The Alphabet* will be judged on its own merits as something to read, as will the 60 or so pages of *Life Studies*. We can only guess *why* these works will be interesting in the future, one that may not even have room for such concepts as “perfect binding.”

(P.S. It’s ironic that, in that bit from Duncan, he quotes the end of the Lowell poem about Delmore Schwartz. My favorite ending of a Duncan poem is that one in which some attention to different registers of style in contrapuntal play is demonstrated, and that ends:

A second: a moose painted by Stubbs,
where last year’s extravagant antler’s

lie on the ground.
The forlorn moosey-faced poem wears
new antler-buds,
the same,
“a little heavy, a little contrived,”
his only beauty to be
all moose.

It's actually the same kind of compression that Lowell brings in at the end of the Schwartz poem – a sudden swerve from the dominant, even heroic, meter into a bathetic, skipping tone, finally focusing on a fine point at the end as if the poem were balanced on a pin, like some geological balancing act out in the Yellowstone Park. Duncan almost seems drunk here himself – and I like it. Ironically, the climax results in a telescoped image of an animal (or animal part) – “strong” imagism, a la white chickens, coming to save the day again.

Few poets were more afraid of letting his metrics be taken over by anything as vulgar as social realism or speech as Duncan – I find so much of him unreadable because of all the gaudy European trappings, the Pound-envy, the loping “stately” rhythms and capitalized Nouns, like he were Philip Sydney and didn't know better, or Mallarme, enriching every detail with “correspondence”. I guess I just never believed he had as much access to higher states of knowledge than the rest of us – I hope it's fair to be suspicious here, since he made some huge claims. In terms of “fear” versus “freedom,” I'm not sure that Duncan wins. One is, after all, quite free before the “void” – it is, after all, the evacuation of meaning that provided some of the bases for the theory of Language writing itself (and that brought Mallarme himself to start slinging words across the page like dice).

When Duncan starts psycho-analyzing his writers – Spicer is apparently the poet of “death” while he himself was of life, or sex, or whatever, from my dim memory of the Spicer biography – one must – as a good iconoclast and heretic – recoil, as it's clear such oppositional binaries are only intended to create the image of power around the naming creature, ye who sets terms (terms being, in themselves, very useful). Sacrificing this power for the sake of flows, on the one hand, or in service of the dialectic, on the other, seems to me to be imperative – if that doesn't sound too much like a “spiritual” disposition. But they must at the same time be questioned at all moments if possible – why not, seems to me the only confirmation of living that is reliable.

Bells & Whistles

July 07, 2003

My hope is to gather more thoughts on this “School of Quietude” issue while I may, running up against this logic of the blog, which is to permit spokes of divergent meaning that could distract from a potentially absent core (I like the centripetal / centrifugal dialectic but it has its dangers). However, Ron Silliman asks, on his blog, whether a certain statement of his on “vispo” – visual poetry, a sort of grab bag descendent of Concrete poetry and, I guess, visual digital stuff – is what I, in my statement on Lowell, characterized as RS’s “famously knee-jerk, even reactionary, positions.”

I’m not going to claim that what I wrote was very nice – it wasn’t, of course, and I suppose I could become infamous for being knee-jerk as well – so I apologize. But one might almost believe that Silliman is the most read critic in our decidedly uncritical America right now (certainly his advertisements of his hit count, a weird tick that other bloggers have picked up, seem to suggest it) along with the most trusted (I don’t ever actually read much in terms of criticism of his very content, and he’s certainly very selective of what he links to). Anyway, so I poked the growing behemoth, if only to give a little flavor to what I wrote and, more importantly, to keep it honest. Going out on a limb with something a little off-color like that while trying to make a point leaves one vulnerable to being dismissed outright.

Most recently, Ron writes:

One thing that all the works I looked at here have in common is that they’re static – straight JPEG files, no Flash, not even an animated GIF. This I found very liberating. It puts all of the demands of the work right back onto the image itself, rather than trying to distract us with bells & whistles. It also suggests work that, over time, will be able to survive beyond current computing platforms. Anyone who is old enough to have seen “animated” poems written in Harvard Graphics or Ventura Publisher when they were the presentation software programs of the day will recognize the advantage of that. At the very worst, these works can just be scanned into whatever new platform exists ten, fifty or 150 years from now & be good to go, something you can be certain won’t happen with the present generation of animated, sound-augmented writing.

There are several obvious flaws to this statement.

For starters, this assumption that .jpegs and .gifs will be what creators of new computer platforms will want to preserve from old ones, and not Flash and sound files. Why is this? Both formats are simply rows of digits that are then interpreted into something – an image, a sound, a bit of interactive software – that is translated by a machine into something more or less comprehensible by the senses and intellect. That one is for a

“two-dimensional” image file and the other a “three-dimensional” or time-based digital object should not distract one from the like basis of each.

The second is a sort of purism about the “image itself” apart from the “bells and whistles.” Did one ever write, after the first decades of film, that “I like this photograph because, unlike a movie, we are not distracted by the motion of the objects — they just sit there to be looked at”? Or after listening to a quartet of Beethoven’s: “I would have much preferred one stringed instrument as the other three were distracting.” Certainly, any Flash artist would want to create works that integrate the separate elements into a whole — if it fails, that’s one thing, but the tool or the motivation itself cannot be blamed. (I’ve never used sound in my Flash works because I suck at it.)

The third is to compare the trivial experiments in the very nascent stages of a technology — the animated poems of Harvard Graphics or Ventura Publisher (I haven’t seen them, but no doubt these are silent and without interactivity) with poems in Flash. This would be comparable to criticizing cinema based on the films of Muybridge and Edison, or criticizing live motion digital graphics — the stuff that brings you Titanic and Matrix Reloaded — based on an anecdote about Max Headroom and early episodes of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Ironically, people love to look at these early incarnations of art in new media — the retrospective of video work from the 70s that was up at the Whitney two years ago was fantastic, and emulators of early computer platforms are rampant on the internet — there’s even one for the ZX81 (search my blog to find it).

Lastly, it’s quite obvious that Flash cannot be “scanned into a new medium” but neither can film — can you imagine people walking around holding flip-books of Abel Gance’s three-screen, 6-hour or so long Napoleon in front of gas lamps? And can visual poetry be “scanned and good to go”? I suppose the assumption is that one prints out a .jpeg, that the paper on which it’s printed will last 150 years, and then it can be scanned to reproduce what the original .jpeg looked like. But inkjet inks don’t last that long, and cultural memory is even shorter — who will be around to say you got it right, and who is creating verbal descriptions for this work now? (Needless to say, one can’t scan in ballet.)

One thing I always ask, though, when I see “vispo” is not “is it poetry” but, in the most basic sense, “what is it about”? I rarely see discussions of content, of social relevance, of ethics, or even of art history — as in the use of appropriation to give a discursive element to what might otherwise be a completely non-linguistic creation — in relation to “vispo.” Is it all just tweaking the sign / image divide? Is it’s only purpose to make us ask questions of genre? Why have no visual poets tried to occupy the same space in American culture that, say, Andy Warhol did, or try to be as politically relevant and upsetting as the Situationists (or the clowns who made that “Empire Strikes Back” poster with Rumsfeld cast as Darth Vader)?

I think there is content to Mielke And’s work, for example, it seems to have some spiritual / ecological dimension — some relation of the organic component of graphemes

that suggests an interest in biodiversity – and Basinski often incorporates aspects of Greek mythology in his work that seem to suggest a relationship to the paintings of Cy Twombly when drops in tags about the sacking of Troy, etc. There’s probably writing on them somewhere but I’ve not investigated it.

The list of great predecessors – Finlay, de Campos – are rich in social and aesthetic dimensions that I’ve written about elsewhere (my article in Jacket [appears here](#); a better one by Drew Milne [appears here](#)). Certainly, the TRG – Steve McCaffery and bpNichol – have created a rich discourse around their work that investigates some of the classic concepts familiar from Language poetry and deconstructionism, but with a “pataphysical dimension and modal variety that make reading this work fulfilling in its own right, beyond its use as “theory.”

“Content” might be a clumsy word to use when discussing the thematics of what Finlay is doing – I often use the term “thematics” instead, since, at best, the disparate universe of his works points to some pre-Socratic philosophical landscape (located “here and now” in Scotland, of course) that simply cannot be revealed in material world. His content is the lava of history that flows under our fragile creations – the Roman coliseum, the Macintosh computer – and which only reveals itself in moments of terrible conflagration, social “eruptions” in a sense. It’s all very scary. But certainly, one might look at his use of charged political symbols, such as the guillotine and the swastika, as some attempt to insure his work is never discussed in purely formal terms – is it “poetry” or not? – but rather to throw the focus on these subterranean aspects of his themes. If only for this reason, I’ve often focused on Finlay’s place in the “vispo” universe – he doesn’t let you relax into your prejudices.

Ironically, Ron has chosen a purely aesthetic – dare I say “quietist” – stance, and one based on fairly conservative aesthetic positions (the “pure” image released from any sort of social or historical considerations) to discuss, and subtly shout down, the innovations that are being made in poetry using Flash and other new media technologies. His statement are even angled such as to preclude the possibility of such innovations, without a single piece of historical data to justify this preclusion.

I’ll be the first to say that there is a lot of pretty clunky stuff being done in Flash, but my sense is that no “tradition” (or shall we say “lineage”) in the arts is never as clean as one would like (but *who* wants it clean?). One needn’t throw away the technology after discovering that the technology itself does not provide enough material for the theme of the work – quite the contrary, this void or emptiness can be a beginning (not to sound too much like Yoda). I’ll be happy when Flash works are not “about Flash” or “about interactivity,” not to mention when poetry is not “about language” or “about lineage.” I hope this doesn’t sound prescriptive – all options seem, to me, open (except, of course, that of being “quiet”).

More CPR for Silliman and Lowell

July 08, 2003

I don't have time to write today... probably good news for you! But I've hired a stand-in — one of my staff writers, Robert Lowell, who has recently responded quite positively to literary CPR, has agreed to submit some of his early comments on William Carlos Williams and the Beats to FSC.

Lowell's collected prose is quite short, about 370 pages, and not ambitious at all as a "critical" collection. In fact, they are not unlike blog entries themselves — informal appreciations of what he felt informed him (though far from "lugubrious"). The parts that I most enjoy are those which depict him *changing his mind*, and which illustrate for me the humility one poet had before the language, which he recognized as *coming from elsewhere*, in a sense — transmissions from the culture in which he lived but felt that, at times, he didn't know. I don't think it was ever in fashion to be entirely candid about one's failures, especially after having won the Pulitzer with a first book.

Lowell's first two short essays on WCW were written in 1947, around the time he published *Lord Weary's Castle* (the title of which, Ron Silliman claims, told us "all about his literary allegiances"). But his longer, more considered "career assessment"-type essay was written in '62, from which the following quotes are taken:

To explain the full punishment I felt on first reading Williams, I should say a little about what I was studying at the time. A year or so before, I had read some introductory books on the enjoyment of poetry, and was knocked over by the examples in the free-verse sections. When I arrived at college, independent, fearful of advice, and with all the world before me, I began to rummage through the Cambridge bookshops. I found books that must have been looking for a buyer since the student days of Trumbull Stickney: soiled metrical treatises written by obscure English professors in the eighteen-nineties. They were full of glorious things: rising rhythm, falling rhythm, feet with Greek names, stanzas from Longfellow's "Psalm of Life," John Drinkwater, and Swinburne. Nothing seemed simpler than meter. I began experiments with an exotic foot, short, long, two shorts, then fell back on iambics. My material now took twice as many words, and I rolled out Spenserian stanzas on Job and Jonah surrounded by recently seen Nantucket scenery. Everything I did was grand, ungrammatical, and had a timeless, hackneyed quality. All this was ended by reading Williams. It was as though some homemade ship, part Spanish galleon, part paddle-wheels, kitchen pots, and elastic bands and worked by hand, had anchored to a filling station.

This is, to me, a fantastic, and well-constructed, paragraph — he makes the detritus of a dead tradition sound more interesting and polyvalent than most critics make

their “live” traditions sound. His litany of obsolete wares could be right out of *A Season In Hell*, in which Rimbaud writes that he liked “old-fashioned literature, church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling...” The use of the word “ungrammatical” followed by the 7-word sentence hinge that dramatizes RL’s conversion is subtle. The phrase “All this was ended by Williams” almost reminds me of the “All the field was lifted...” line that Williams himself wrote about Olson’s Projective Verse essay. Trumbull Stickney!

Next, here is Lowell on Williams’s idiom. Note the use of the word “exotic,” which I think is an accurate way to convey the very alien nature of Williams’s use of “speech” in the context of anti-intuitive, quasi “formalist” – dare I say “futurist” – lineation:

I have emphasized Williams’s simplicity and nakedness and have no doubt been misleading. His idiom comes from many sources, from speech and reading, both of various kinds; the blend, which is his own invention, is generous and even exotic. Few poets can come near to his wide clarity and dashing rightness with words, his dignity and almost Alexandrian modulations of voice. His short lines often speed up and simplify hugely drawn out and ornate sentence structures. I once typed out his direct but densely observed poem, “The Semblables,” in a single prose paragraph. Not a word or its placing had been changed, but the poem has changed into a piece of smothering, magnificent rhetoric, much more like Faulkner than the original Williams.

One might almost think that Williams, who wanted to learn from the American idiom of his times, was all about *simple sentence structures* in the ideologically-tinged reading of his attention to “plain speech.” I’ve always contended that Williams had little to do with “plain speech,” which seems to me a hangover from Puritan times when our souls (like the economy of a “rogue nation”) were supposed to be transparent.

I was under the impression that the autobiographical free verse poems of *Life Studies* were the clearest indication of the effect of the Beats on Lowell’s poetry, but the following suggests otherwise. I trust any poet who is honest about their conversions, including those who seem intent on changing their mind if only to keep it alive. The question, then, is how to keep a *poem* alive – here’s one story (this could almost be a section from Eileen Tabios’s excellent, probably utterly forgotten, *Black Lightning* – look it up!). I thought “Skunk Hour” was a fantastic poem when growing up and still do:

“Skunk Hour” was begun in mid-August 1957 and finished about a month later. In March of the same year, I had been giving readings on the West Coast, often reading six days a week and sometimes twice on a single day. I was in San Francisco, the era and setting of Allen Ginsberg and all about, very modest poets were waking up prophets. I became sorely aware of how few poems I had writ-

ten, and that these few had been finished at the latest three or four years earlier. Their style seemed distant, symbol-ridden, and willfully difficult. I began to paraphrase my Latin quotations, and to add extra syllables to a line to make it clearer and more colloquial. I felt my old poems hid what they were really about, and many times offered a stiff, humorless, and even impenetrable surface. I am no convert to the “beats.” I know well, too, that the best poems are not necessarily poems that read aloud. Many of the greatest poems can only be read to one’s self, for inspiration is no substitute for humor, shock, narrative, and a hypnotic voice, the four musts for oral performance. Still, my own poems seemed like prehistoric monsters dragged down into the bog and death by their ponderous armor. I was reciting what I no longer felt. What influenced me more than San Francisco and reading aloud was that for some time I had been writing prose. I felt that the best style for poetry was none of the many poetic styles in English, but something like the prose of Chekhov or Flaubert. When I returned to my home, I began writing lines in a new style. No poem, however, got finished and soon I left off and tried to forget the whole headache. Suddenly, in August, I was struck by the sadness of writing nothing, and having nothing to write, of having, at least, no language. When I began writing “Skunk Hour,” I felt that most of what I knew about writing was a hindrance.

Here’s a type of self-criticism that I would hope becomes addictive (not least with me). How many poets do you know who call their knowledge a “hindrance”? And if this is just a sign of manic depressiveness, then I don’t know what to say except the depths, at times, are productive of useful confrontations with one’s ego. Is this the writing of a person who was tied to (in Silliman’s words) “presumptions about ‘what poetry should be.’” (BTW, Has anyone ever noticed how James Schuyler’s elegy for Frank O’Hara, “Buried At Springs,” is practically indistinguishable, metrically and tonally, from a *Life Studies* poem. Sheik it out!)

Lastly, here is Lowell on the “poetry wars.” Reading the following gives me the impression that Ron Silliman’s contention that the “school of quietude” is performing literary CPR by buttressing the collected Lowell—they probably are, but who cares?—can be countered by a contention that Silliman is performing a similar service—by reviving the “poetry wars” he and other “New Americans” (the values of the Language poets don’t seem to play a large role here) are able to don the old Cold War armor and appear rather fresh again. This is just a suspicion, and certainly there is no reason to “care” about this either, but alas I can’t get over the nagging feeling that these forms of balkanization are stripping the poetry culture of an ability to think subtly through complex issues.

A seemingly unending war has been going on for as long as I can remember between Williams and his disciples and the principals and disciples of another school of modern poetry. The Beats are on one side, the university poets are on the other. Lately [in the sixties] the gunfire has been hot. With such unlikely Williams recruits as Karl Shapiro blasting away, it has become unpleasant to stand in the middle in a position of impartiality.

The war is an old one for me. In the late thirties, I was at Kenyon College to study under John Crowe Ransom. The times hummed with catastrophe and ideological violence, both political and aesthetical. The English departments were clogged with worthy but outworn and backward-looking scholars whose tastes in the moderns were most often superficial, random, and vulgar. Students who wanted to write got little practical help from their professors. They studied the classics as monsters that were slowly losing their fur and feathers and leaking a little sawdust. What one did oneself was all chance and shallowness, and no profession seemed wispier and less needed than that of the poet. My own group, that of Tate and Ransom, was all for the high discipline, for putting on the full armor of the past, for making poetry something that would take a man's full weight and that would bear his complete intelligence, passion, and subtlety. Almost anything, the Greek and Roman classics, Elizabethan dramatic poetry, seventeenth-century metaphysical verse, old and modern critics, aestheticians and philosophers, could be supplied up and again made necessary. The struggle perhaps centered on making the old metrical forms usable again to express the depths of one's experience.

For us, Williams was of course part of the revolution that had renewed poetry, but he was a byline. Opinions varied on his work. It was something fresh, secondary, and minor, or it was the best that free verse could do. He was the one writer with the substance, daring, and staying power to make the short free-verse poem something considerable. One was shaken when the radical conservative critic Yvor Winters spoke of Williams's "By the road to the contagious hospital" as a finer, more lasting piece of craftsmanship than "Gerontion."

Well, nothing will do for everyone. It's hard for me to see how I and the younger poets I was close to could at that time have learned much from Williams. It was all we could do to keep alive and follow our own heavy program. That time is gone, and now young poets are perhaps more conscious of the burden and the hardening of this old formalism. Too many poems have been written to rule. They show off their authors' efforts and mind, but little more. Often the culture seems to have passed them by. And, once more, Dr. Williams is a model and a liberator. What will come, I don't know. Williams, unlike, say, Marianne Moore, seems to be one of those poets who can be imitated anonymously. His

style is almost a common style and even what he claims for it – the American style. Somehow, written without his speed and genius, the results are usually dull, a poem at best well-made but without breath.

Lowell's Shakespearean approach to the culture wars – he occupies the role of Prospero in the staging of the Ariels vs. Calibans – seems, to me, just more trustworthy, at this moment in time (but also that), than the Leninist mode of aligning forces around some perception of obdurate “class” values (not to mention those of “nation”) that are unclear even to those on which you side. Making your enemies out to be utter conformists while all your buddies are free-thinking individualists just never struck me as a good tactic.

I think it's a sign of the even-handedness of “madman” Lowell's approach that he includes this anecdote about Yvor Winters, and it seems to me that Lowell, if anything, hopes only to make this “war” tenable as something of cultural value, were that possible, than to win it! Such a dramatist's flair would be welcome in Silliman's blog. And sad to say, the final line of this excerpt seems to me true of a lot of the writing that RS seems to class under the “school” of plain speech – few are able to maintain the level of tension that appears in Williams' best work. Silliman may be right that there is a shipwreck occurring, but I'm not sure we are looking at the right shore.

Further Notes from Underground

July 09, 2003

Ron Silliman writes in his most recent post:

I do want to reiterate that anyone who lived through the 1960s will remember that, in politics, the “third way” strategy advocated by Stefans – Walter Mondale was its apotheosis – invariably came out as road kill. While the intentions of a rapprochement may always be noble, in the world of American letters it requires amnesia to imagine it possible. If you’re anywhere on the post-avant spectrum – as Brian clearly is – the idea of rapprochement is virtually a death wish. Kasey, on the other hand, is exactly on target when he suggests that a “17th way” will be possible before a “third one” is.

You can read my own post about this subject to find out whether I “advocated” this “third way” or whether or not I stated (quite clearly, I thought) that I felt the Language poets were themselves symptomatic of a third way strategy, if not the third way themselves. They stand between the innovative, fractured, relentless, flawed and inspired “hot” modernists that one associates with the period between the Wars – questioning every issue of language, gender, politics, society, spirit, fearless of *falling off the cliff* – and the method of a more professional class of poets with their attendant university positions, presses, canons, critical debates and journals, collegiate panels, cultural capital and signature themes (whether the “anxiety of influence” or the “new sentence”), not to mention what I elsewhere termed a “loyal fan base,” etc.

It’s a difference between diving into the abyss of the “new” and exploiting methods that are, indeed, worth exploiting, but are not very original to its practitioners. There is nothing wrong with that, of course – *Shut Up*, for example, could not have been written by someone without the ambition, immediate social support and life-strategy (his job, his discipline) of Bruce Andrews. The Language poets could be said to stand in comparison to this earlier period of modernism as Eliot’s “Four Quartets” could be said to stand to “The Waste Land” – a refinement of the earlier form, but also, in a sense, an amelioration of it – but that, indeed, is cheeky!

Quite obviously, I find nothing wrong with the latter – nor the Four Quartets – it’s just this idea the Language poets (or the New American poets) are always *making noise*, always howling in the field, while the “other” tradition has languished quiescent for the past several decades that strikes me as indefensible, or at least obsolete. I am trying to argue for a complete reevaluation of strategies by the “alternative” current in poetry if, indeed, we are to be the “young Americans” (the opposing force to the “School of Quietude” in Poe’s mind) – provocative, recalcitrant, pains in the asses.

The fact that my own writings over the past two weeks cannot be provided a rebuttal because it's impossible to "disentangle... the *ad hominem* attacks" from what is presumably the good stuff directs us to one obvious point: does Ron expect anyone to read something called "Silliman's Blog" and manage to "disentangle" what is written there from the person we've known (as readers and members of a "community" in which he occupies a position) for several decades as one of the most visible, opinionated – which I applaud! – and prolific poets out there? Isn't the point of being matter-of-fact, meat-and-potatoes, about your view of literary culture to force a reply?

The originator of the term "school of quietude" himself was prone to some classic *ad hominem* attacks, such as the following:

Had [Carlyle] not appeared we might have gone on for yet another century, Emerson-izing in prose, Wordsworth-izing in poetry, and Fourier-izing in philosophy, Wilson-izing in criticism – Hudson-izing and Tom O'Bedlam-izing in everything.

Ouch! It points to the fact that the saltier statements of that initial post were geared toward the style of thinking and writing that appears on the blog, not "the person," and was then followed by a litany of specific points. I think it's ok, and certainly not in the class of "Larry Fagin's asinine bloviating," which RS quotes without comment in his post. The latter, by Daniel Nester, strikes me as a classic *ad hominem* attack, since it's vulgar, and I don't, after all, know what he's talking about nor ever learn.

(I'd also like to know what this "death wish" is? What a strange term! That one will be forgotten, like Hart Crane? That if I renounce God and the "lineage," it means I don't like sex? A truly odd moment in this paragraph...)

I'd also like to know what a political analogy from the sixties, which we all know was a terribly polarized decade, has to do with an analysis of poetical strategies in this century, which seems to me characterized by a sort of tribal attitude of protecting one's peers, of complaining about a "monoculture" but from the vantage of a subculture that, itself, is never questioned in its premises. Ironically (and not insanely) part of the reason I've been critical of Silliman's Blog is that many of the arguments stated there are about, and reflective of, my own reading of American literary culture, but often so limited in its purview, not to mention *un-fresh* in its terms, that I think they are either incredibly vulnerable to dispute by someone with a truly visionary breadth of knowledge (I'm certainly not saying this is *me*), or vulnerable to being entirely ignored – indeed, a "death wish" in itself. If anything, the arguments should be improved by open, and not falsely "objective," disputation, not destroyed.

From this caution I pass to an observation of the late Sir Karl Popper, who could himself be a tyrant in argument but who nonetheless recognized that argument

was valuable, indeed essential, *for its own sake*. It is very seldom, as he noticed, that in debate anyone of two evenly matched antagonists will succeed in actually convincing or “converting” the other. But it is equally seldom that in a properly conducted argument either antagonist will end up holding exactly the same position as that with which he began. Concessions, refinements and adjustments will occur, and each initial position will have undergone modification even if it remains ostensibly the “same.” Not even the most apparently glacial “system” is immune to this rule.

This from Christopher Hitchens, a fantastic prose stylist though more infamous these days as a turncoat, in *Letters to a Young Contrarian*. Not inconsequently, besides illustrating the very motion of historical dialectic here (the “synthesis” being in the viewer of this public debate), this illustrates the very usefulness of there being not a “rap-prochement” between two poetic “ways” — it would be uncharacteristic of me to aim for a simple “rapprochement” in any aesthetic issue — but an attempted, forceful, specific analysis of the methods used and consideration of their potential in the future. I just don’t see how Lowell’s interest in modifying, even destroying, his earlier prosodics because of revelatory experience with WCW can be discounted as another Brahmin ploy and the “innovation” of Robert Grenier’s index-card *Sentences* — a method of “early hypertext” Marc Saporta used ten years earlier in 1963 — be routinely applauded? (I confess that a fare part of my ire was touched off by RS’s “When I am completely dismissive of Lowell...” etc. line, which, let’s be honest, was smug.) Our writing must be “built to last,” with all its attendant inner dialectics, or “built to strike,” with the coarseness of means one associates with polemic — one must decide, I feel, what one is doing.

As it is, the structure of *Silliman’s Blog* — which leapfrogs from subject to subject, creating old news out of matter that, at least one day, seemed of central importance — does not permit for active disputation, which I think is a flaw of blogs in themselves. Ron could write a perfect rebuttal to this very post tomorrow and off I’d be talking about growing avocados in the Andes. We also never know when something was posted, whether it was revised ten times, how long it took to write, or whether the writer is sitting in a hot tub with a laptop and chihuahua or stealing seconds away from a construction job.

I also think that, in this post-war political climate, “we” all have to learn how to be more cunning rhetoricians, more skillful and passionate analysts of ideas, if only because these skills will have to be put to use the next time a large portion of the population is in disagreement with the government. Talking among ourselves in listservs and blogs seems to me out of the question (not that I hope to become next years Daniel Cohn-Bendit — I just don’t want to sit around programming HTML as my only contribution to the discussion.) Isn’t anyone insulted by how ignored “we” were leading up to the war?

Avocados in the Andes (with a side of panache)

July 10, 2003

Kasey Mohammed's posted an excellent email by Jeffrey Jullich on his blog lime tree, from which the following excerpt is taken (Jullich is referring to Kasey's notion of "hypocrisy" in a "quietude" writer adopting poses of "negativity"):

You're imagining a wolf in sheep's clothing, just because it lopes like a quadruped and eats raw meat under that fluffy tail and baaing; — but what I'm trying to remind you, Kasey, is that that what you're taking for a wolf may in fact be a creature more like Mowgli, the *boy raised by wolves*.

Surely, Kasey, put differently, you'd agree rather that *self is formed by language*. It is, in fact, the long practice of various verbal/writing technologies (and all those technologies' socially established options) that *inform* the potential character of any individual so as to result in anything that could be construed as a Quietudist or a Negativist poet. That is to say, there is no Negativist writer without literary Negativism; the former follows out of the latter; it is the precedent of the literary *school* or movement, in both Q & N cases, that, in our current historical scene at least, is taken up as, up to an extent, an artifice, and out of which then only afterwards can develop gradually, by the process of (labor's) identification with one's product (non-alienation), something like a protagonist who can discover him-/herself in that text as in an eldritch mirror, or be so strongly linked with it, with one style, as to be so branded.

That the "self" is made of "language" seems an old truism to me now, but he freshens it with the suggestions of camp, of drag, of dissimulation, inherent in the framework he is setting up, and perhaps the suggestion that a poetics of "negativity" depends on taking advantage of a "situation" rather than anything that could be so programmatic and pious as to be a "lineage." (Jullich is, of course, the guy who turned me into the *Times* for the Vaneigem pieces because he thought I was a fraud!)

Certainly, Jullich is critical of anything that could be considered an "essentialism" in the activities of a poet; his suggestion that there is a *habitus* (well, that's a word I'm adding, from Bourdieu — Google it!) in which a poet operates — a field of prizes, assurances, mores, counter-instinctual behaviors such as the *potlatch* — and that the more successful of "us" has a third eye telling him/her where the walls are, is more or less in agreement with mine. (This is not the equivalent of saying that all poets are opportunists in a field of survival of the fittest, only that there is a response to social forces that are far from obvious — a digression I'd like to avoid for now.)

Though you would think, reading Kasey's and Jeffrey's posts, that I had nothing at all to say on this discussion — I feel like the son who pointed to the fire only to watch

Mom and Dad save the pets and Claude Van Damm video collection to my own neglect, which seems to me just punishment for being a bore—I think the dialogue there is rather rich and detailed if, at times, weighed down by terms—sometimes getting too deep into things puts us too far at the back end of Plato’s cave, fingering the remote control to electrify the shadows.

But in reference to Silliman’s stated support of KSM’s views: Kasey is being quite clear in his emphasis on his “two” ways being that of negativity and some presumed “quietudinousness” — he’s talking about a binary metaphysics here, to a degree, suggesting that the “DARK is the absence of LIGHT” dualism stands in contrast to what I think many of us think is a Manichean dualism between the equal forces of LIGHT and DARK (not to mention RED, WHITE, BLUE, etc.). Kent Johnson raises this issue with his comments to Kasey about Pessoa—hunt around in the comments section—Pessoa being, one might suggest, the first poet of postmodern “camp” and originator of the avatar—though a stylistically astute one at that!

Kasey holds this in contrast to an armchair sociology that equates the former binary with political positioning—not to disparage sociology itself, just to highlight its casual cameo appearances in discussions of poetic history. I’m not sure whether we know anymore what a truly “negative” political position is these days unless it be, as Jullich suggest, that type which adheres to “wildcat” strikes (yes, another lifting from my readings of Debord). Well, I could go on about that, about politics, about wildcats... but it’s really not my field. (I did see Walter Mondale once in person, when he came to speak in Rutherford campaigning for Carter.)

I kind of wonder if John Lydon is upset that Thom Yorke is using some of his vocal affects and copying his lyrics in the new Radiohead album, or whether Steve Howe is claiming the guitar riff from “Myxomatosis” is from an early Yes record. But that is neither here nor there. (“Myxomatosis” is the name of a Philip Larkin poem, by the way—but I still like the album! In fact, I like the poem quite a bit also—Google it, but don’t use *my* spelling!)

On another note: I’ve been assured by several emails that the Language school has never been in fact “attacked” by the “mainstream” (or “Official Verse Culture”)—that most of the “attacks” came from within our own New American “lineages.” Is this true?

I was on a NYFA panel once with Louis Simpson years ago, and he made it clear that he thought Charles Bernstein’s poetry was total crud, but even *he* thought the criticism was quite good, in fact important and provocative, and CB got the grant. I’d like to read one old school “mainstream” poet who has *attacked* the Language poets, if only to see what terms are being adopted to do so and whether they match up with the “theory” “we” use to describe it. The most I’ve ever seen is a lame phrase or two like “the school of Stein”—clearly a diss, but not an “attack.”

The question being: has Language theory really *complicated* things for anyone, like Williams did for Lowell (or LaForgue did for Pound, etc.), or has it just thrown up the chance for membership in a distinctive, supportive, and much more exciting subculture of American poetry? (Ok, casual reductions again... but I'm interested.)

Another note from Hitchens that I copied down for a different purpose yesterday, but by the magic of cut-and-paste appears for you today:

I have a dear friend in Jerusalem.... Nothing in his life, as a Jewish youth in pre-1940 Poland and subsequent survivor of indescribable privations and losses, might be expected to have conditioned him to welcome the disruptive. Yet on some occasions when I have asked him for his impression of events, he has calmly and deliberately replied: "There are some encouraging signs of polarisation." Nothing flippant inheres in this remark; a long and risky life has persuaded him that only an open conflict of ideas and principles can produce any clarity.

And for what it's worth: here's something I wrote ages ago of an anthology of poetry that had just appeared (a paid job, indeed), and which I think demonstrates that I share many of Silliman's views on the aesthetic hegemony in a *certain* branch of literary culture – really, the culture of the two editors. I situate this anthology as representative of one node between Ashbery / Graham / Ammons (any reader of the Lehman anthologies will know *them*), the performance poets, New Formalists, late "New Americans," etc.

My attempt was to be specific and critical while not turning my objects of study – the poems themselves – into elaborated, ossified Hallmark cards, written by the Partridge Family or the digital extras on board the *Titanic*, though indeed (I haven't seen the anthology in a while, I sold it), I guess it was hard to do. I'm not holding this up as an exquisite piece of critical work, which is why I didn't put it into my ["Little Reviews" section of Arras](#), just, well, more (cannon) fodder for discussion.

The New Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry
Michael Collier and Stanley Plumly, editors
University Press of New England, 2000)

This anthology represents the middle-ground of major American contemporary poetry, passing by such writers as John Ashbery, A.R. Ammons, or Jorie Graham who, in comparison, are just too "out there," and going nowhere near New American Poets – such as Robert Creeley or Gary Snyder – the "Language" poets, performance poets, nor much that could be taken for "new Formalism" (Jacqueline Osherow is the exception). For this reason, it is a convenient book, since

it gives one a clear way to assess what has happened to the academic / confessional line of Lowell, Plath, and Berryman, the group that replaced, for a certain type of literature, the expat dream of the 20's with that of angst-ridden domestic "responsibility", but which was too old for the Beats once they hit the scene (though some tried to latch on). Initially, one could say that it has simply devolved: the narcissism is still there, with most of these poems being too long about anxieties, "deep sensibilities," distrust of the world, adultery, pleasant afternoons and vacations, etc., but the formal mastery of the Lowell generation — with its ties to Eliot's modernism, Auden's precociousness, Williams' directness and prosody, along with Lowell's background in Latin and Berryman's syntactical experiments based on readings of Shakespeare, etc. — are gone. While most of this work is not "confessional" in the strict sense, it is disheartening how few poems rise above the basic frame of the unescapable self in the world, or how, when a different theme is adopted, it is still tied to basic formal tricks — the piling up of redundant detail as a baroque display of knowledge is one of them — which renders the work repetitive and mundane. Consequently, even when formal meters are adopted — as a way out of the too free, often just prosaic, free verse meters — nothing like the sparkle of the Elizabethans (those to whom Eliot paid homage) breaks through. One hundred poets were invited to select from their own work, eighty-two of whom responded: include several well-known names, such as: Marvin Bell, Stephen Berg, Frank Bidart, Lucille Clifton, editors Michael Collier and Stanley Plumly, Alfred Corn, Deborah Digges, Stuart Dischell, Mark Doty, Rita Dove, Cornelius Eady, Tess Gallagher, Louise Gluck, Linda Gregerson, Maralyn Hacker, Michael S. Harper, Brenda Hillman, Mark Jarman, Galway Kinnell, Li-Young Lee, Philip Levine, the late William Matthews, W.S. Merwin, Robert Pinsky, Alberto Rios, David St. John, Gerald Stern, Mark Strand, James Tate, C. K. Williams and C.D. Wright. Most all of them are either university professors (most of those for whom job status is blank in the brief bios are also professors) or editors of such journals as the Virginia Quarterly or The American Poetry Review. The most interesting pages are probably provided by Louise Gluck — though not her best work, there is enough of her Rilkean "purity" of expression and her various lineation to satisfy — and Linda Gregerson, whose tight lines in irregular, Williams-esque tercets often achieve a microtonal variety that lifts them above the pedestrian: "It had almost nothing to do with sex. / The boy / in his corset and farthingale, his head- / voice and his smooth-for-the-duration chin / was not / and never had been simply in our pay. Or / was it some lost logic the regional accent / restores?" (95, "Eyes Like Leeks"). Mark Strand's "I Will Love the Twenty-First Century" is quite masterful, with its quiet, Proustian ending — after the narrator has a Coolidgean wedding-guest type encounter with a man who foresees a ghostly double for himself in the next cen-

tury, the poem finds a rich muteness in: “‘Oh,’ I said, putting on my hat, ‘Oh’.” William Matthews has probably the two most easily dislikable lines in the book — “I’ve ended three marriages by divorce / as a man shoots a broken legged horse” (190) , a real derailing of whatever charm Berryman might have possessed — but triumphs with “Bit Tongue,” with it’s polyglot mish-mash of tonalities and languages, confined within a persona that is pathetic but mildly attractive. Several poets — like Tate and St. John — have written much better elsewhere, and look mediocre here; other bits and pieces, such as the first section of Yusef Komunyakaa’s meditation on Whitman and slavery, “Kosmos” — are quite beautiful. In any case, this is not a book that reflects a “commitment to the future of the nation’s poetry” as its editors profess, so much as a tombstone for its glorious past — or one of them, at least. It is the type of writing that the workshops are modeled after, which is why this type of poetry is on a downward spiral.

Getting Ready to Have Been Skunked

July 11, 2003

Kasey once again puts in the hours on his blog, this time about Lowell's "Skunk Hour." I haven't had time to read the most recent post with any close attention, being trapped by errands and visiting friends from out of town, but I did catch wind of the following from Steve Evans' Third Factory there:

Though Lowell leaves me cold after numerous dutiful attempts, I'd been following Free Space Comix's recent defense of him with interest and admiration - until I hit the claim about "the tortured, jagged, compressed rhythms" of "Skunk Hour" being like "punk rock." I'd as soon assent to that statement as vote for Bush in 2004.

What I wrote was, of course, quite different:

...because a formal technique is being employed (in his case the "new sentence," which never, frankly, struck me as radical) hardly spares a poem (such as his tiring, distracted Roof book *N/O*) from being branded as passive – about language, about society, about issues of epistemology and genre. What can be more "quietudinous" than a passivity regarding these issues? In comparison, the tortured, jagged, compressed rhythms of Lowell's "The Skunk Hour" come off as punk rock.

There's a matter of context – I would never mistake Lowell for a member of Black Flag – and of the verb "come off," as here means "mistakenly appear to be". One can fart on a subway and one can fart in church - in one case, it's an act of indifference or even (considering the options, such as vomiting) "quietude," and in another heresy. Of course, I was being provocative, but I'm not sure what the point of eliding the subtlety of this statement is; such activity overripens this discussion, gets it ready to be old news too soon. I think it pays to be careful, if one cares.

The 60 so odd pages of "Non," from *N/O*, are rather listless and, I say, also tedious. More importantly, though, you will not find any poignant societal perspective there even after twenty pages, compared to which the 8 or so stanzas of "Skunk Hour" are like a 1 minute 30 second burst of - indeed - "negative" energy. Lowell lines up his targets and then takes them down; Silliman drifts along – in a similar quasi-pastoral mode, paratactically or not – reminding us periodically of his cred or "lineage" as a post-Marxist, post-structuralist syntactician ("Schizophrenoform"). The landscape is, at least in *my* view (I am getting a little forceful and final in my statements of quality here, I fear), left much the way he found it.

"The car radio bleats..." (from the "Skunk Hour") has a similar, if not the same, negatively that Adorno emits when writing about popular culture; it's an uncompromising condemnation, modified by a bad mood. And am I all that wrong in hearing "I am an antichrist" in the words "I myself am Hell" — in contrast to various "I's" (mostly exhibited as "eyes") we see below? Drop the 8 stanzas of "Skunk Hour" into "Non" and I'm sure you will see — like dropping Radiohead's "Morning Bell," one of their sweeter songs, into Eno's "tedious" *Thursday Afternoon* — that you will hear compression, negativity, focus, passion, and noise.

If the issue is class and political viewpoint, it's worth remembering that a lot of punk rock bands were 1) populated by upper-middle-class renegades like Joe Strummer, or 2) populated by neo-Nazi skinheads or alluded to Nazi imagery quite careless of politics. (I don't think anyone is saying Lowell is a neo-Nazi, of course.)

The following is from "Non":

Divide wire coat
hangers into
those with cardboard,
those without, those
wrapped in filmy white paper,
whether the hook is formed
by one metal strand or two, design
of the twist at the base
of the neck

what I like most
about the Albany Public Library
is that it smells
the same as when I was six years old

Schizophrenoform

It's not that
there's a dead cat in the gutter but
that it's been there all week

Snoodlenook

Little moths under the porchlight,
be with me now
A dog in the distance

barks compulsively
Birds chirp
to greet the early dusk

the landlady lives at the foot of the stairs
that run down the hill beside the house
so wooded you don't even notice them

Dreamlike,
the color TV
thru the neighbor's gauze curtain

ice crackles as it melts

nibbling Cracker Jacks from the palm of my hand
the little man in the blue suit salutes

the runner forgets to run,
so is easily forced at second

Etc. etc. It goes on like this (or *has* gone on like this) for 30 or so pages.

Is it really a strength of the "new sentence" that a pretty dull observation about the Albany Public Library, conveyed indifferently, rubs up against rather bizarre coinages (or perhaps overheard neologisms) such as "snoodlenook"? Is it right of me to hear the attenuation of syntax that we enjoy in WCW's "As the cat..." poem in the first stanza here, or one of Marianne Moore's "precisionist" poems about the structures of animals and shorelines, but with little of the formal elegance (or "precision")? What is the nature of the irony of "be with me now" in reference to the moths—just dropping an echo of some other strata of language, some plead to God one might make in the throes of a disaster? Why? (This would be a pretty poor example of the alienation effect, if that's the point.)

(I confess to never having been keen on the "new sentence" as a way to "free the prose writer of character, plot, narrative," etc., as has been so often stated. Some writers free us from genre, others from joining the ranks of the "disappeared." And how priceless would it be to have the stabbing of a 59-year old pederast and ex-kindergarten teacher named Havecourt Quine, once head of the F.C.C. and most recently involved in a gray market scheme to ship infected oysters into the poorer cities of British Columbia, at this very moment in the poem—the game still playing in the background?)

But most importantly, beyond these stylistic issues: where is the urgency here? I really *do* believe that arguments can be made for this sort of poetics of "drift"—the

“Drifted... drifted precipitate” section of Pound’s *Mauberley*, in the section in which Mauberley is in exile, echoes through my mind as I write this – but I’d really like to hear them, especially related to a politics of “critique.”)

Compare “the landlady” and “a dog” to the lengths Lowell takes to make his figures *specific* and of his locale, and you’ll see why I think Lowell is much closer to the imagist / Williams aesthetic line than is generally believed (at least in what is now “our” cyber gopherspace). “The Skunk Hour” bears comparison to Williams’ “The pure products...” poem – which I think is perhaps WCW’s greatest single poem and perhaps my favorite of our long 20th century.

I am not saying I think “Skunk Hour” is as innovative, as “good,” at radical, or productive, etc., just that its author learned his lessons well from the predecessor poem. It’s a visionary evocation of an American landscape about which he can say little discursively but whose images – in the guise of animals, garbage, shitty music, displaced horniness, etc. – haunts and oppresses him. As I claim in a review – which I will publish eventually on this blog – after this you can only go to Ashbery and “Daffy Duck in America” – a whole-hearted reclamation of the sublime production scale of pop culture in the grand metrics of, indeed, the “tradition.” (I word it better there.)

(On a similar note, has anyone noticed, or thought about, how Ashbery’s early “Portrait of Little J.A.” is a defusing parody of the “confessional” mode, voiced through what I think of as a particularly [male] gay affect of envisioning oneself as the over-sensitive, delicate flower threatened by the violence inherent in heterosexual, suburban “normalcy”? “Normalcy” itself is coinage of Harding’s, one of the few presidents that seem to crop up in JA’s poems periodically. Anyway, I think the heavy rhymes, the stanzas, the “there I was” Mary Pickford woe-is-me attitude of the poem suggests some camping of the heroic “confessional” mode.)

Lowell’s phrase “hermit heiress” is far from obvious – it’s actually an interesting coinage, considering its position in the enjambment. I always wonder, reading this, whether one is prodded to sound out the “h” in “heiress” seeing it come right after “hermit,” and where that would take me – *in the language*, geographically and class-wise – to do so. I don’t find similar changes of speeds in the metrics of, say, Duncan – the second line of “Skunk Hour” seems the remains of the explosion caused by the blockage of “hermit” the previous line, three words that seem just tripping over each other. This is a sign of the care I feel Lowell takes in his best poems with sound patterning – a sign of his relationship to Hopkins, who he’s written about finely.

I guess my central question is, in these quick notes: which poem is more focused in its “negativity,” more attuned to the properties of language, more aware that time, indeed, is precious, and that reading (not to mention writing) should not be a matter of indifference but rather a point-by-point handling of the opportunities and issues it throws up?

(I'm perfectly aware that fifteen volumes more of boring dross has been written about "Skunk Hour" than about "Non," or about Grenier and Antin or Silliman's great other books for that matter, and that some more of the latter needs to be done. My argument is for an approach to poetry that can get past the telegraphing of "lineages" and tell us, with fresh eyes, what in fact the language is *doing* in a poem — after all, one of the great claims of the poets who are not of the "quietude" is that there's some sort direct engagement with language as *material* that other poets are lacking. I'm just not convinced that's true — we are all prone to sleeping on the job.)

Quick Note to Kimball

July 14, 2003

[Nothing new today... thought I'd post my comment to Jack Kimball on the main part of the blog since I spent more than five minutes writing it. Look at [Jack's original post on his blog](#) if you want to see what I'm replying to. I promise to have something original to say or change the subject in the new week!]

Hi Jack,

Not sure what to say here except you make the poem sound **more**, not less, interesting to me – was this intentional?

Practically everything I've posted on my blog has some element of the "grotesque" (Renee French and Werner Herzog, for example) and even "drag" (Kiki & Herb, bits in Denton Welch) about it. These must be among my minor vices, but they are aesthetic strategies (if that doesn't sound too sterile and high-minded) that I care for. (Madame Sosostris is, of course, Wyndham Lewis in drag.)

I'm really not on a mission to make anybody like this poem, certainly not! But I'm amazed at how much ire it's managed to create among those who purport to **dislike** it – has there been any single poem published by "us" in the last 20 years to so inspire such disgust? And do I need Charles Altieri to tell me when a poem is "dead"?

(The effect of symbolic castration of your last paragraph, heightened by image of three epitaph-wielding men in a triumphant circle bounding, like Matisse cut-outs, around the corpse, is itself rather "grotesque" to me – is this the way academics have fun?)

I can think of a few books – Harryette Mullen's *Muse and Drudge*, Kenny Goldsmith's work, Christian Bok's *Eunoia*, etc. – and last but not least Jennifer Moxley's two books – that always bring out strong opinions, but I can't think of a single **poem** that's done this.

In any case, your approach here is to me very interesting, much more than the approach that takes discernment of "lineage" (not to mention plays of reference and polysemeity) as the main object of critical study.

I must say, though, I also see an anxiety, not so much here but perhaps elsewhere in this discussion, to separate us from the "squares", that is similar to that shown in David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde*, which had its enjoyable moments, but certainly one can see the irony of having such a **square** as Lehman himself trying to convince us that O'Hara was hip because he laughed at the earnestness of Lionel Trilling and crew. (This whole debate seems pretty "square" to me, actually, but square is, I hear, the new hip.)

Yes, I love O'Hara too, and his words about anything echo with me always — especially about poems being “good for you” and “force feeding” causing “effete” — but the irony here is that “we” — this is perhaps the crux of my “lineage” critique” — are so concerned with poems as PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS that paradoxes such as the presence of the “grotesque” and “hilarity” in the midst of a highly structured poem by a “square” are not recognized anymore.

I don't think of poems as pedagogical tools, and to say they are poison, and words are a virus (to echo William Burroughs), is something like a step in the right direction.

I don't believe anything I read in a poem — in a way, the poet is more like a movie director, even if we are looking at an “I” — the actor will always be imperfect and bring in whatever accidental features of his or her personality and physicality into a performance. We might imagine Kinski is to Herzog as Hopkins is to Lowell (regarding the tub-thumping of the rhymes that you mention disliking in your longer post on the blog.) These prisms can be interesting, and seem to me rarely absent.

(This is not “lineage” — one doesn't look at Kinski's performance in Sergio Leone's *For a Few Dollars* more as a hunchback reprobate to help determine whether *Aguirre: Wrath of God* is any good.)

It is always a perverse, but hopefully engaging, reflection of an author's “intentions” and “personality” — the critical line avowed by Eliot, of course, thought the latter worth getting rid of entirely.

Even Quicker Reply to Cabri

July 14, 2003

[Poorly spelled, poorly grammared, rushed thoughts to Louis Cabri's recent posts to the [Buffalo Poetics List](#). I had really meant to deal with Louis' writing about form in Silliman's Non but found what he wrote a bit confusing in the end. You can read his entire post [here](#). I'm just confused about what he means about form in the early part of the email, but I'll leave it for now as I've just rented *Punch Drunk Love*.]

Just some comments on what Louis had written about Ron's poem a few days back. He is comment on the following from NON:

Titles
are often misleading,
subtitles seldom are.
Checking
out the driver
in the next car
through my rear view mirror
at a stop light
(one never sees
the lower body),
thin ebony man
with a long white beard,
tricolor rasta cap,
high sharp cheekbones
that cause the eyes to recede.
I decide he's a gentle person.
Rolls of roofing
turned upright,
black cylinders atop the gravel.
There comes a moment
whenever
I read my poem when
it is apparent
it is terrible
I'm a fraud,
no one would ever
choose to hear

or to read this,
but then this moment of panic passes. (N/O 60)

LC writes:

“When you read the sentences as discreet units, it’s pretty straight-forwardly denotational. But, reading the gaps between these sentences render the sentences completely wild, unpredicted (since the text is so overdetermined with details, it would be impossible to stay in control of their interconnections), unconscious even. Here Silliman reads the “subtitle” of the guy in the car behind him, whose “title” refers to his physical description: “thin ebony man,” etc. So, the guy is black, and is advancing on the white narrator, but the “advance” (i.e. suddenly we are no longer in a world of pure, objective-seeming denotation!) is benign (“he’s a gentle person”): one can go allegorical here. This “advance” is benign probably because the man is old (eyes receding somewhat) just like the narrator admits of himself (and this ties again to the opening motif of old form). Now the next juxtaposition: how does one account for it? It has to be accounted for. The juxtaposition are not themselves arbitrary: the stanzas/sentences are. The skin color of the older gentleman who is in a car behind the narrator-driver now becomes (and at the same time importantly does *_not_* become) the black color of roofing tiles!!? This image’s social evaluation is very ambiguous. It is work-to-be-done, of *_new_* roofing and of refurbishing - but, is it regentrification, or evidence of upward mobility (whose?), or completely unrelated to housing and instead about industrial expansion (we don’t know the narrator’s location)? This image becomes the next “title,” and its “subtitle” is the following sentence, which seems to carry the emotions the narrator experiences at the sight of the roofing material: self-doubt about his own work-to-be-done as poet. The syntactic wonkiness of the middle phrases of this sentence (“whenever / I read my poem when / it is apparent / it is terrible”) mirrors its subject, self-doubt.”

It almost seems to me that Ron went back and changed the first “black” to “ebony” in order not to have the words appear twice in two successive sentences. If we were to read this as a social text the way you would choose (your reading reflects some elements of Jeff Derksen’s idea of “rearticulation” as a development of the new sentence), then you would have to read the word “Ebony” (capital “e”) in the use of the word—i.e. this guy has something to do with the magazine. The use of “ebony” just stuck out at me here as more a matter of creating a euphemism rather than a stylistic flourish, since there’s so little here that represents an interest in stylistic flourishes of this sort—it’s all kind of “Man pounds rice” language. Just like the “the landlord” and “a dog” in other parts of the poem. (Ron’s turn to a belle-lettrist tone on his blog is curious

to me for this very reason—he never seemed to have an interest in elements of what might be called “fancy” in his prose or even poetry, but all of a sudden there is this range of affects.)

When nouns and noun phrases get pared down like this they can often, ironically, become quite riddled with symbolism, and indeed your reading of this slab of NON points to all sorts of correspondences between the sentences and stanzas that are nearly as intricate as what is often said to occur in “Skunk Hour” (or Eliot’s Four Quartets, whose language is nearly devoid of adjectives that serve a visual purpose). I’ve never been much of a symbol guy myself—the thing is quite often the thing to me, so if the use of the word “ebony” doesn’t let me get closer to what it is Ron is seeing—and my claim here is that he is seeing *less* because he’s had to use a quick replacement word to get away from using “black” twice (merely my suspicion, of course)—well, I guess I just don’t see how “ebony” improves upon what it is we’re seeing here. [PS: if he’s comparing this person to something *made of* ebony then I’d really be hut and blathered... I write as I move my jaundiced hand across the ivory skin of my girlfriend...]

Take “Fairy decorator” as a contrast—I never read this as a reference to the decorator’s sexuality but I see it now, I always just heard “fairy godmother” and assumed it was a comment on the privileged status of those for whom all things appear to be gifts—despite the semantic slippage Louis writes about elsewhere, I somehow *see* this a whole lot more. Maybe it’s just synaesthesia—I have a tendency to see color in a lot of phrasing that is technically “colorless”. I’m also, like Jeffrey (?), not sure how cheeks make the eyes recede, though I understand this as a painterly flourish—an unspoken “as if.” (Ron often suggested in early interviews that his new sentence prose was an attempt to work into the space of a novel, so I wonder why he doesn’t encourage some more novelistic traits in his writing—wouldn’t Nabokov have really tried to nail this visual detail?) But the following observation from a WCW poem (“Catholic Bells”) which just drops out of the sky really impresses me:

(the

grapes still hanging to
the vines along the nearby
Concordia Halle like broken
teeth in the head of an

old man)

The very frailty of these words hanging in the stanza (an isolated by me here) suggest these grapes also. (I was raised in Rutherford and never heard of “Concordia Halle” but isn’t there a Concordia grape?)

Anyway, curiously, your reading of this stanza goes up against what I thought were some of the principles of the New Sentence, which is that the sentences were paratactic and would not be subsumed under a montage type of functionality — we see the titles, the titles appear on the cab, the man is black, the tiles are black, etc... — but rather thwarted narrative and syllogistic connections. The line “I decide he’s a gentle person.” seems to suggest that the poet wants us to play with a cause-and-effect determination here, a game I like. So I guess the new sentence doesn’t have to be entirely “paratactic” (I think it works best when there is wavering), but it seems to me that if such an overdetermined matrix of social meanings as you present here were underlying such passages of the New Sentence, then rather than the author permitting a play of meanings for the reader in his or her poem, asking the reader to be creative, the writer is merely making it much harder to see this matrix of meanings by not elaborating the connex.

I don’t think this passage is so carefully written as to suggest that — connections are happy to occur, but you see some counter-charges within the mass — “ebony” slipping in to show that the author is aware of lexical repeats — the phrase “Titles are often misleading, subtitles seldom are” seems vague to me (so “President” is misleading because the person is not actually presiding, but they “Hey you jerk!” under a flurry of Spanish curses is accurate?) — etc. I like the line about the doubt and the way it comes in after all of this detail from “outside” — ok, I know it sounds like I’m just harshing on Ron’s poetry but it’s really just this poem and how it relates to his ideas, especially what he’s writing these days.

Peacitude

July 14, 2003

[This entry has been revised since I first posted it yesterday. It's been adjusted to fit your screen.]

I'm taking a break from this whole shebang as I'm preparing for a trip to Toronto — waxing the moustachios, loading up the paint gun, that sort of thing — and the debate's spawned such a variety of forking paths, many of which lead to a defense of Robert Lowell, which, in isolation, raises a lot of issues (as in Steve Evans' poignant "well why don't we write about James Schuyler") that I'm not sure how to proceed or if it even matters.

My point was to argue (grouchily but hoping to make a serious mark) with a set of terms being tossed about on Silliman's Blog (which I view as an effective act of criticism) — "school of quietude" versus an unnamed something else, the idea of a "third way" as a "death wish", the continued relevance of a battle against the British (except Raworth, of course) and their "dead" meters, the use of an ascertainment of "lineage" as a stand-in for "deep reading," etc. I think of these as strategies of "Balkanization" that are not useful, are blind politics, and seem terribly dated.

Worse (I've just thought of this), these concepts don't really give us tools to look at literatures that are not primarily white, and not primarily American. For example, these lines in the sand don't exist for Australian literature — though there was a New American-style rebellion in the sixties, it produced very stanzaic poets like John Forbes, Martin Johnson and John Tranter, and radicalism was still tied to some form of Surrealism due, I think, to the Ern Malley incident — nor does it exist in Asian American poetry, which I learned when working on *Premonitions* with Walter Lew.

They do exist in some ways, but it's more complex than saying that Theresa Cha and Gerry Shikatani reflect an interest in big-M "Modernism" that poets like Arthur Sze or David Mura don't immediately seem to have. If the argument is for a thing called "Asian American poetry" — and I've argued that such a thing might not exist — but if so, then the universe of that poetry must be incredibly diverse and rich, heterogeneous and electric, not just depicted as a rivulet departing from the so called "avant-garde" line. Asian American poetry is not "better" because "we" are no longer just "telling our stories" — that historical determinism (expressed in one of RS's essays) has always seemed offensive to me, for obvious reasons, but also simple-minded.

What has come out of this debate, to me, is that more poets of the "alternative" current are very astute and willing "deep readers" in a standard (not necessarily "New Critical") sense, and that these methods of deep reading have only been somewhat problematized by the changes of reading tactics advocated by poststructuralism, etc. Certain readings of Silliman's *Non* have utilized tactics that are not that different than those used

for “Skunk Hour,” even if the conclusions as to the “content” (or just what side of the political coin one is) are different. And these tactics have been effective, if not getting “us” closer to what “good” writing is without stylistic prescriptions.

But for example: the Battaillian excessive flows of McCaffery’s reading of Bill Bissett in *North of Intention*, with its stress on the ludic and excess, have rarely if ever been evoked, or if so in the somewhat less rigorous form of polysemia – which in other terms can simply mean “ambiguity,” a word one associates with William Empson. I haven’t read Empson, however, so I can’t say more. The Brechtian “v-effekt,” which Bernstein writes about in “Artifice of Absorption” (Silliman blogs about this, also) is also not being used critically – so has the critical approaches of Language poets really made their mark? Likewise for Projective Verse: are any of “our” poets really taking a stand against the “verse that print bred”?

I still think that, often, linguo-Marxist strategies of understanding the *material* of language can be more usefully applied to a “conservative” poem like “Skunk Hour” – or “Having a Coke with You” – than can often be applied to “avant-garde” poems, and that these are better poems because of, not in spite of, their narrative attributes and relationship to the history of poetic form. Spatializing the words “Polish Rider,” “coke,” and “Frick,” however effectively done and giving us a sense of language’s “materiality” (a term I rarely use myself), does not quite provide us with the meat for a precise hermeneutic strategy that gets us closer to the *world*.

The poems in Ashbery’s *Tennis Court Oath* or Coolidge’s *Space* have emotional valences that are rarely written about. And pomo reading strategies, in my naive view, were created for reading narrative and “linear” poems and novels – not to mention plays – and don’t necessarily argue for the need to break away from these forms.

On a more selfish note: I (along with a few others) have been trying for several years (quietly) to come up with a language for describing poems – in my reviews for *Boston Review* and *Publisher’s Weekly*, the “little reviews” series on this blog and on ar-ras.net, on *Jacket*, in *Rain Taxi* and the *St. Mark’s Newsletter*, etc. – that try to focus on specific effects in poems in spite of where an author might have gathered his or her experience with language, and to introduce new, mostly non-US American, names into the mix (admittedly mostly Scottish, British and Australian), not to mention a way to describe poems that don’t rely on one’s knowledge of, and unquestioned reverence for, the esteemed American avant-garde masters. In fact, finding a way to modify these appreciations without causing wild dismay has been another project.

(I’m monolingual – with the exception of being able to sing most of “Die Ballade Über die Sexuelle Horigkeit” at the drop of a hat – and go in fear of translations, but it would be a great thing to see some convincing writing on non-English poetry – something that makes the work exciting and not merely good for you as a taste of the “other.” My only real attempt has been something on Christophe Tarkos in the Little Reviews.)

So it's seemed, reading parts of Silliman's Blog, like a shuttling back to a (golden) stone age to see that someone is actually *dissuading* readers from reading British poetry (claiming the meters are flat or adherent to a dead heritage — the "past"), or reading *outside* of a presumed counter-formation, or railing against a lineage that includes Bryant and Holmes (my American Library *19th Century American Poetry* volume is quite fascinating to me, actually), etc., as if that's *better* for you, one, we, it, and has something to do with the future. I'm probably exaggerating, but I'd like to hear the arguments otherwise, if only just to hear them made fresh again, and thereby reflect favorably back on the entire "avant-garde" project in the US (which methinks, still, was "quiet" compared to the French one — so there).

Thanks everyone who chimed in about these minor rants, on the poetics list and elsewhere.

Punch Drunk Love was great, by the way.