

Reading McCaffery: A discussion of *Seven Pages Missing, Vol. 1*  
Christine Stewart and Ted Byrne (2002)

Christine – What does McCaffery mean by a “post-semiotic poem”? See the back cover of *Seven Pages Missing*: “The poem beyond semiosis is finally beyond reference, beyond the conditions that make the usual meaning of ‘meaning’ possible.”

What is the “usual” meaning of meaning?

What Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, calls “the corporeal exteriorization of discourse,” is when the text does not attempt to express a clear message or a “theatre of emotions.” This provokes what he calls “pulsional incidents”. These are linguistic occasions where language points to the thick skin of its own materiality; that is to its sonic, and rhythmic qualities. Barthes refers to this as “writing aloud” (66). In writing aloud the text works to evoke “the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of the vowels, a whole carnal stereophony.” This writing aloud manifests what Julia Kristeva refers to as the semiotic aspects of language. This includes its rhythmic qualities, its contradictions, meaninglessness, disruptions, silence and absence. According to Kristeva, poetic language is writing that illuminates the material qualities of language and its expressions. The material aspects of language – tone, rhythm etc. – are its semiotic aspects. These aspects are irrepressible and work to destabilize the symbolic signifying process. This gives them their disruptive, even revolutionary potential.

For Kristeva the semiotic aspects of language are the manifestations of the instinctual, unconscious drives of the irrepressible pre- and anti-symbolic body. Kristeva’s *le sémiotique* refers to the organization within the body of its instinctual drives as they affect language and its practices (see Leon Roudiez’ Introduction to *Desire in Language*). This is also true for Barthes. In *The Pleasure of the Text* the stereophonic quality of the text is opposed to the symbolic process of signification. That is, the semiotic is opposed to language and meaning. This notion of “meaning” is what Derrida calls the classical idea of meaning – the idea is that it is possible to affix a stable meaning in a particular linguistic configuration.

My question is this: Is this McCaffery’s take? And if so, what of such distinctions between the symbolic and the semiotic, between meaning and the materiality of language?

While Barthes and Kristeva (and maybe McCaffery) hold the carnal, the semiotic separate from the symbolic or meaning function of language, I don’t think that this is how McCaffery’s stuff works – when it works. The poetic function of language is to materialize meaning and its symbolic function – McCaffery refers to this as post-semiotic. But does this make for a poem that is *beyond* semiosis, beyond reference, “beyond the conditions that make the usual meaning of ‘meaning’ possible”?

Why should poetry be beyond reference, or the usual conditions of meaning? Why would the materialization of its poetic function make it beyond reference? What else can a poem be but in the midst of, pointing to, the very crazy mechanics of, the aurally swollen place of, and bursting with, the usual conditions of meaning?

Ted – Aren't you, in this last question, undoing the temporalizing and spacializing that allows conclusions to be arrived at? The trajectory of these opening remarks moves from a thinking that wants to structure everything – even within a post structuralist orientation – through a series of rejections, negations even, to a resituating of writing within a kind of a-temporal, undifferentiated materiality, corporeality. In effect, aren't you demonstrating an irrelevance of such terminology as “beyond reference” or “beyond the usual meaning of meaning”? From where you want to speak, these terms are meaningless. And I'm with you. But then I think, be careful because it'll just come back to bite you in the ass (the dialectic).

A tendency to coincide with the logic of this moving and heterogeneous chora finally forecloses the thetic. *Mais alors*, it's the heterogeneous itself that is lost, and in its place is displayed the *fantasme* of identification with the feminine (maternal) body, if not the mutism of the paralyzed schizo!

(Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* 163, my translation, exclamation mark added)

C – I think that Vico would say that it is all fantasmic identification with the body and that mutism is the place out of which comes the first gesture that signals that identification. The mind is a metaphor of the body. A metaphor is the mind thinking itself. So then what would be a dialectic in this case? Is the idea of a dialectic Cartesian? If everything we read is caught up in a Cartesian, Hegelian, Heideggerian, Derridian network how can we ever “speak” “outside”? For Vico, there is no outside. It's all human: inside and out. But there is extension. And maybe we can re-inscribe the word “outside” into what [Susan] Howe calls “antinomial traces”. Most writing inside any outside got burned at the stake or sent off to the wilderness of margins. Isn't the idea of the unconscious itself, as separate from consciousness, part of this split imposed by thinkers like Descartes, like even Plato, and then driven home by Freud? Vico seems to be proposing something “else” through his idea of topos and metaphorizing as an active extension of space, which is interesting. And yet elsewhere we are caught up in these terms and words and definitions that don't allow us to go anywhere else. But what if outsides are all we have; what if all we have is surface. And what about Agamben's halo: “its beatitude is that of a potentiality that comes only after the act, of matter that does not remain beneath the form, but surrounds it with a halo” (*The Coming Community*)? But a halo is not a surface except perhaps as a ripple.

I was talking to Lissa [Wolsak] about Vico this week and his idea of the origin of language and human society: In this case, Vico means the origin of Gentile society. The Gentiles, according to Vico were twice fallen, doubly lapsed, because of how badly Noah's family behaved after the flood. The Jewish people, on the other hand, retained their composure and their relationship to God and thus to the truth of the world, words etc. The story (and it's an

odd one) goes like this: After the flood, Noah's sons and daughters (the son's wives) got quickly off the boat. They were tired of rules and Fathers (as Vico says). On land, they went wild: had random sex and crapped anywhere they wanted. Babies were born, weaned young and left to wallow in their own shit. Instead of dying the neglected babies flourished. Fertilized by their own excrement, they transformed into gorgeous giants. The shit from these giants fertilized the forests and the fields. The giants never bathed and so thrived on the nutrients of their own feces. The trees grew so vast and tangled (from all the fertilization) that the giants had to sweat and strain to push their way through the forests. The nitrous salts from their giant sweaty armpits fell on the earth and made everything grow again (and again). Extreme fecundity, everything lush and thick. The huge forests, the massive giants sweaty, shitty, pushing, shouting. And these big dirty bodies existed in direct sensuous contact with the world. Each sensation occurred and then replaced the next. There was no memory, no mind, no bank.

After 300 hundred years, the earth finally dried and the air dried. Lightning ignited in the exhalations of air, and when it struck, the giants were afraid for the first time. It was a fear that could not be acted on—there was nothing to fight or to eat. The thunder only signaled the passing of lightning. It signaled an absence. There was nothing the giants could do. And so, they paused—the thunder brought about a moment of reflection in the giants' previous life of ceaseless sensation. Time occurred – diachronic and synchronic. Time was mind and from mind the first thought came. The first thought was a metaphor, an extension of the giant mind into, up against, entangled with the material world. In this extension, the giants perceived themselves as Other. The sky was body; the thunder was voice. And the body was called Jove. In the moment of the first thought, the giants ended and the human emerged. In awe of the big sky body other, the just post-giant new-human began to bathe in ritual ablutions. As they bathed they began to shrink in body (no more fertilization). As they continued to think up the world, their minds expanded and their heads grew—humans emerged (big heads, little bodies). These were the first humans. They made up the first human society that had to get along without God (due to the random sex and shitting). These humans no longer had access to God's truth. They had to make up their own. Thus, metaphoric language, poetry: the language of necessity. According to Vico, this story demonstrates that all that humans can ever know is the real that humans make – *verum factum*. Vico wasn't interested in proving what is or isn't. He was interested in the fact that anything *is*, that there is an *is*. If you see.

I don't think that Lissa was very impressed. But I think Vico makes some pretty interesting observations about language and about what constitutes a subject, a society, a world. He is touted as a great humanist. His ideas about origins and etymologies have turned all sorts of different people on (Adolph Hitler, Harold Bloom, Hayden White, Hazard Adams, Northrop Frye, Edward Said, James Joyce, Karl Marx). But he isn't a humanist or into origin unless you carefully unpack the terms. You could use Benjamin's notion of origin—the idea of origin as memory or recognition. According to Vico, poetry is the language of necessity because poetic language is the illustration of our collective memories, our beginnings. In poetry, humans make up a world to make up for the one we lost. All that we know – science, philosophy etc. – is based on our poetic, metaphoric, metonymic understanding of the

world. If we look at our metaphors (fables in brief – Vico calls them), we see the world, we see ourselves and how we have constructed the whole thing.

Maybe the term beyond reference is more *ur* than I'd rather.

T – Maybe, instead of saying that the “post-semiotic” poem is beyond reference, you could say that McCaffery writes poetry that is sometimes beyond the anxiety of the usual conditions of meaning – that is, it no longer clings to the illusion of language’s seamless capacities for signification. But, no. That isn’t quite right. Maybe McCaffery sometimes writes poetry that can encompass the anxiety, of the ache, of the nostalgia on which all “usual meaning” turns. This encompassing alters that turning. In fact (in words) that very turning is both released and displayed so that language articulates that meaning, is fully, complexly visible; even beautiful – or not; but, no longer consuming; no longer consumed by the sordid dream of absolute signification.

provide the context and the content will follow  
(McCaffery, *Seven Pages Missing* 224)

C – Isn’t this the form that is meaning? Language returned to language. I think Agamben says that. Language looking at itself. This is Lisa [Robertson]’s *Perspex*, no? That is, meaning forming by highlighting, making transparent the processes by which meaning is forming. That is, the same mortality that affixes itself to the semiotic, the materiality of language – its tone, its rhyme, its rhythm, its line and play – is ascribed to the meaning. Meaning is literal: mechanical, contextual, material, mortal, constructive and destructive procedures. These procedures contain their own necessary mortalities; and when these mortalities are placed in full view, the theatre that is meaning, that is language, is exposed (naked) – always consensual, catastrophic, formulating, residual, always graphemic, often strident, always rupturing, ruptured, posturing, disembodied and always syphilitic – riddled with rapid, suppurating and necessary (because it restores) decay.

not a cuckoo  
but casting a throat  
into other bird songs  
(144)

For Barthes and Kristeva, the body and its unconscious drives work on language. Is this true for McCaffery? That is, does he see language as affected by the unconscious drives of our instinctual desires – a conduit through which the basic battles of our psychologies are played out?

What if language is the conscious and unconscious drive of our instinctual desires? What if language is a site wherein the materiality of the sign does not simply haunt and disrupt the signification process? What if the materiality of language is the signification process, is the symbolic energy of language, the locus of desire? Just as form has poetic meaning, meaning has poetic and material form? If the articulation of the body is located in the

sensual and erotic materiality of the word, then why aren't the lexical and symbolic elements of language? To write out loud and highlight the materiality of the sign is to highlight the materiality, and the machinations of the process of symbolic signification and so to materialize the signifier and the signified in such a way as to bring to bear upon it the histories that have brought it to its present signifying postures.

While Kristeva writes about the semiotic in language or about how *le sémiotique* affects language and its practice, can't poetry work language as always already *le sémiotique* – an always already material forming life form?

Instead of putting his life into his novel . . . he made of his very life  
a work for which his own book was the model . . .  
(Barthes on Proust, *Image Music Text* 144)

Or have I got it all wrong? Is that already what he is saying, doing. Sometimes the stuff feels like a full blown unblown nostalgia:

the soft mushy parts. Wet stone melting stone broken stone  
running body stone gland stone erect. Stone secret musics done.  
Granite hard round viscous parts. Not the whole. Never the whole.  
It can't be the whole.  
(McCaffery *Seven Pages* 261)

Why should it ever be whole? Or beyond reference for that matter. For that matter which it is – and it is most usual.

Re: your lyric interests, did you read pages 184 – 197 (“from *In England Now That Spring*”)? I like this and do not suspect its *ur* yearnings.

T – I don't know. I'm still trying to teach myself to read this writing, and it's not easy. I'm always fascinated by that which has the appearance of literature but undermines its precepts. Or that which undermines even the text that conceives of itself as literary. This is what I meant by “lyric”. Not that the instances you point to are lyric (the selection from *Intimate Distortions* would be another example), but that they still derive something from appearing to be so. Like, take, “a drawing”, on page 109, another translation exercise, is lovely as lyric, holds the effect of lyric, as fetish of meaning and subjectivity (Kristeva), as ideologeme, but is really even more to the side of lyric than the Stein source text. It doesn't *make* sense.

It wants to *make* something other than sense. Is this wanting described by the term “post-semiotic”? I don't know. He makes the point that he came by the term “semiotic” in the sixties from [Charles Sanders] Peirce via those Brazilian concrete poets (434). And the wanting is said to already be for a text that liberates from the word and shifts control from the writer to the reader.

C – Re: Lyric. This is something that I’ve also been thinking about. McCaffery is adept at creating and manipulating (splicing, giving/withdrawing) a kind of ‘master’ code of POETRY. What you could call the lyric or the conception of that which is literary. And I wonder, about that, as you say, “deriving something from appearing to be.” What is that derivation. Is it emotional and is it fair? Is it him showing us what he thinks we think we want and then withholding it?

I don’t think that was something that Stein was interested in at all.

Partly McCaffery’s ‘manipulation’ reveals the mechanics of the machine of lyric poetry (its traditions, assumptions etc.) and exposes to the reading reader the extent and intensity of their own investments in that machine and their own complicity in its functions.

And what does it mean when you say – “it is lovely as lyric”? And we’ve (you and I) been ‘brought up’ to be wary of its pull. Lyric as a cheap tart (made with gelatinous cherry filling). What is the link between the lyric and nostalgia? One ignites the other. Which comes first? Is nostalgia the condition which points to knowing as an emotion of memory? Is lyric knowing’s trope.

I also think that – by virtue of the relationship between emotion and cognition, lyric and nostalgia – lyric (even if it is problematized) also addresses and thus constructs a community of readers, and this address works the ‘author’ in the text. This ‘author’ might be mutilated, exposed, ridiculed, parodied, or read as master manipulator of a collective set of codes, but even so, it works and creates a relationship with the reader. This relationship configures a readerly identification and activity even as (or maybe because) the poem problematizes the relationship and renders it complex. Could be that the working of the complexity renders the relationship (of reader to text, of reader to ‘author’, of reader to reader – lyric forms us as readers so that we must meet ourselves) more fully.

I don’t know Peirce or the Brazilian poets. And I’m not sure about that abdication of writer. I’m not sure that it is an interesting way of looking at interesting writing.

T – Yes, I wonder terribly about that. I keep coming back to this notion that if the text is unreadable – particularly in the sense that it doesn’t give rise to acts of interpretation, of *reading*, or requires another kind of reading which is not grasping, not interpretive – then, in fact it really engenders a passivity in the reader and is not at all fulfilling the claims that, as you say, McCaffery makes. So the writer gives up sovereignty only in appearance, as a kind of trick that disempowers the reader and reinstates a different kind of authority – one that deludes itself. Or maybe both the writer and the reader are disempowered. Or, maybe, as I always suspect when writing, the writer is always already the reader.

So I don’t think that his use of the term ‘semiotic’ can be pinned down to any particular use within the field of semiotics (*la sémiotique*) or to Kristeva’s psychoanalytic/linguistic semiotic (*le sémiotique*). I’m tempted, like you, to want to think of it more in terms of *le sémiotique*, or of Barthes’ *illisible*, materiality of the word, and so on. But I think

McCaffery's working within a range that encompasses the modernism that they are addressing, and yet, at the same time, there's so much more that's illegitimate rather than merely transgressive. You can get a sense of this from the recent anthology he did with Jed Rasula (*Imagining Language*). Or from the extra-literary, or anti-literary practices of his sound poetry or his type of concretism. Not "beyond reference," but "north of intention." Nor "beyond the anxiety of the usual conditions of meaning," although this is a pretty neat formulation. However, I think we *are* thrown into an anxiety by these texts. Andrew [Klobucar] said something like this the other day in a talk at the KSW, something about "the anxiety that language poetry usually causes us as readers." And it's not the usual anxious grasping after meaning, or the anxious pleasure of frustrated (readerly) expectations. Or an anxiety caused by the supposed control I've been given over the text, the reprobematization of power within the text. In many of these texts, my anxiousness is not to know the meaning, to decode or interpret – I'm not even tempted to a close reading – but to know the structuring principles.

C – So, what is that Modernism? And re: "illegitimate": McCaffery writes somewhere something like: Derrida cannot be right because art must be always wrong.

T – I think that rather than "encompasses the modernism", I meant to say something more like "comprehends". The modernism that they are addressing seems to be, not the historical avant-garde, but that romanticism that came to be called "symbolism" and "surrealism".

C – What does it mean if we need to know the structuring principles? What does it mean if we don't?

T – Yes, I know, I've been chastised for this before. But the procedures can't be deduced from the text. Knowing them gives a kind of comfort, but it doesn't change the way the text is read. So perhaps it is akin to trying to force meanings out of the text. On the other hand, when I'm told that a description of the method somehow spoils the text, I feel that what I'm being told is that it demystifies the text. That is, maybe such readers are clinging to the mystery of letters. (Note, your question is about need, not knowledge.)

There's an aspect of puzzle-making in *Seven Pages Missing* that runs from the mathematical sublime to the "lowest" forms of word-play.

But then, yeah, sometimes I do find myself "beyond the anxiety of the usual conditions of meaning." Reading aloud matters a lot to some of these writings. The second time through I started reading aloud right at the selection from "Ow's Waif" and found, in those pieces, a kind of struggling of source texts to out, and it was often in the rhythm, the repetitions. It was as if there were something about Newton's Optics or New York prostitutes that you could only know through the filter of these distortions. (I also felt this as a misappropriation.)

I realize that my earliest attraction was to performance, the hearing of “Lastaworda” or “What we Wukkers Want.” The only authentic *reading* experience I’d had till now was “The Black Debt,” which was something I needed at the time, something very strong.

C – What do you mean “authentic reading experience”?

T – Wait, I have to get my etymological dictionary! Maybe I meant an experience in which the reader finally does become the author. Not an audition.

But now I’m seeing that, overall, this ‘reading’ is an experience of hearing *and* seeing – not musicality and image, but something else that I’ll try to define. I feel that I haven’t really addressed your opening comments sufficiently, as much as I’ve tried to. The last paragraphs were thrilling to me – meaning as decay, the materiality of language as the signifying process. But I think that they restate Kristeva’s very concept of the semiotic. In the context of her development of that concept, thirty years ago, as a theory of poetic discourse, your restatement would only differ by being undialectical. That is, you expand the semiotic to encompass, or devour, the symbolic. But isn’t that the aspiration of poetic discourse?

C – Yes. Exactly. I think so. But in Barthes and Kristeva etc. there is much comfort in these oppositions – symbolic, semiotic etc. – which need to be re-fined or re-stated. As far as the performative goes, I think that that is where, say, Barthes’ idea about the “death of the author” pretty much falls apart. The thing about McCaffery is that he uses Barthes, Kristeva, or some kernels of their thinking (death of the author etc.), constantly and, for me, often problematically – one, because the ideas are often essentialist; two, because they get thrown around like candy. These are ideas that I have soaked in unthinkingly for so many years but which have mutated interestingly and are part of the massive poetic conversation that goes on. One of the criticisms of McCaffery is that he doesn’t understand the theories he cites, ‘uses’. I don’t think so. But, I do think that there is often a huge discrepancy between what he says and what he does. Which makes the whole idea of knowing someone’s “structuring principles” a problem. But, it also challenges the idea that there is only one way to read the stuff. Or that the author is in some kind of control.

T – I guess I didn’t really mean “structuring principles”, I meant procedures. And maybe there my curiosity is only to know to what extent the author is removed, is absent, absconded. I mean, is he inventing, arranging, or maybe not even that. And now we have Lang-Po machines to contend with (GTR’s Workbench). And maybe all that this amounts to is a more concerted attempt to shift the author-function to the reader. But, I don’t think so, because the reader-function has been so transformed in the process. The other question, the “discrepancy between what he says and what he does” also speaks to a shifting of function, but within the subject – he says one thing and does another, but maybe *he* doesn’t know what *he* is doing. Maybe knowledge never knew. I’m thinking this morning, reading *North of Intention*, that each description of another author’s practice is a description of his own (how could it be otherwise?). And these descriptions elaborate a range of relationships (and non-relationships) between author and text. For example:



Mac Low employs

a set of austere principles that emphasize the traditionally negative or counter-values in writing: grammatical transgression (even suspension), the elimination of a conscious intention, the removal of the writer as a subject “responsible” for the texts it “writes”, diminished reference and the absence of the subject from the productive aspect of meaning. (222)

Tostevin

gives the processual exterior of a multiple subject in movement [*sujet en procès*] through a register of intensities that situate and circulate upon – but are never identical to – meaning. (88)

Bissett’s

corpus [is] a coagulate of forces to be experienced, but not elucidated, problematics to be felt but not reconciled. What is called for is an anti-reading of an anti-text with a forgetfulness in the face of what we do read. (92)]

So you’re performing something rather than, or as well as, theorizing it.

I think that Kristeva does provide a theory for what we do. But it makes me uneasy. Partly because her writing is so “scientific”, so austere and unpoetic, it gives me the creeps. But I do want to talk about this. Especially as it applies to your comment elsewhere about the essentialism of *écriture féminine*. With which I don’t agree, at least if the comment is meant to apply to Cixous, say, or Brossard. I first noticed this term (“essentialism”) being used by feminists in the 80s to distance themselves from a particularly pernicious strain of ‘goddess’ talk. But then the brush strokes got broader and were applied to Kristeva and Cixous, among others, for reasons I can understand, but don’t think fair.

C – How to talk/write about language in a way that is not based on negation? As I said before, I’m not sure that McCaffery’s own articulations of his writing always work. I think that they are often caught up in a kind of nostalgia/absence/longing/negation that the work itself belies, or dances itself out of, or does as well as. If the metaphysical, via Hegel, Heidegger etc., is based on foundation as negation, language as desire, as death and absence etc., then I want to walk about with it elsewhere. Which is what I like about Spinoza. Agamben suggests that Spinoza’s philosophy is intrinsically positive and that this holds it apart from the philosophical discussion of the West that is based in negation. Agamben reads Antonio Negri reading Spinoza. Negri argues that Spinoza’s idea of the *conatus* refuses the dialectic. The desire to thrive is intrinsically based on a system of relation and interruption that disallows the dialectic. I think I want to move from these

binaries: presence, negation, etc. Kristeva is always making a split of things – male/female; symbolic/semiotic; body/meaning. And *l'écriture féminine* which always bothered me with its milk metaphors, but maybe, as you say, that isn't fair and I need to go back to them.

T – To what extent does this “split” coincide with the Hegelian/Marxist dialectic? To what extent is Kristeva (like Derrida) working against it, to what extent within? There's a footnote in *Semiotiké* which always fascinated me. She distinguishes three types of “semiotic practice” in relationship to the sign. The third type is

a paragrammatic semiotic practice : the sign is eliminated by the correlative paragrammatic sequence that can be represented as a tetralemma : each sign has a denotatum; each sign does not have a denotatum; each sign has and does not have a denotatum; it is not true that each sign has and does not have a denotatum. (52, “Le texte clos”).

C – What the hell does that mean? But I like it—a crazy syllogism.

What about Spinoza? Agamben talks about the *Savage Anomaly* by Negri re. Spinoza – have you read it? One idea here: poetry that involves the body through its pictoriality materializes meaning. Or I guess you could say semiotizes meaning. Which is, somewhat, what I was trying to get at before. Though there are twinges uncomfortable there. Which need thought. But, ah – I end with Barthes on language as death. Easy to say – but not resolved. Agamben talks about poetic language exposing the death of the subject in language, but revealing the we / the community / the coming community (and, I guess the past communities) that is behind all meaning. Which I suppose works in a Wittgensteinian way. There is room there and air and the hilarious – and McCaffery is funny. Language as consensual – therefore no subject can be singular. All subjects are an articulation of consenting (which takes at least two). But then doesn't that make the foundationless foundation only foundationless for the subject as “I”? Doesn't that mean that the “I” equals some kind of common? And this seems much different from simply stating that language is death, and the author dead.

And that is another thing I'd like to re-work. The author isn't dead if language is performative. If language is world, gender, human, desire, non-human etc., forming and unforming, then the author is more next to it in a configured and linguistic relation. As long as we frame language as death, language as desire and desire as the expression of longing and therefore absence, even if the words are reassembled, they are still glued with such residue. And I can't make them work when I'm thinking McCaffery's book. And it's the passivity of nostalgia. But maybe that isn't right either. Death is not always melancholic. Neither is desire. And so not meaning either. Like at a wake, or when giddy while grave digging. It's looking into the abyss of where all of it (meaning etc.) caves in and then picks up again.

you sea –

how sweep shines  
the weeds  
(146)

\* \* \*

C – I wrote this following stuff about McCaffery years ago. What was I reading? . . .

A composition on itself. The way of shapes. The schemes of ideas. Knowledge and ecstasy. Reading McCaffery. Writing feasting upon an idea as art is writing. Writing words as desire:

Desire is not a transitive verb. With the subject set in process (*jouissance*, death) we have lost the traditional sense of self, but gained a Text. And Text is a body (McCaffery, *North of Intention*, back-cover); as real: Words are defined as components of reality (Weir, “Lecture”); as pictorial: “[W]ords inhabit more a pictorial than syntactical space with multi-directional possibilities for reading (vertical, diagonal, lineal). Space and placement here, also evoke the narrational, interactional suggestion . . .” (McCaffery *North of Intention*, 35).

By activating the semantic, syntactic, graphemic, and acoustic elements of language McCaffery writes the reader transgressive. We are trespassers hazarding the farther sides of language & beyond.

Our languages, our shared systems of grammar, reflect, and linguistically enact our social systems of control. In the face of these systems poetry can be a resistant force. Poetic language can rupture the totalizing force of conventional writing forms by challenging, disobeying, and disengaging the figurative and literal hold these systems have on us. It can re-form the ways in which we think and see.

But can language unhinge us from a world institutionalized? Here, I am linking a pictoriality with his writing which works towards this unhinging.

For the more and the more he wrote, and the deeper  
and deeper that he dived, Pierre saw the everlasting  
evasiveness of Truth; the universal lurking insincerity  
of even the greatest and purest of thoughts. Like  
knavish cards, the leaves of all great books were  
covertly packed.

(Melville, *Pierre*)

[A]nother edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed.

(Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text?*)

[G]rammatical transgressions and non-gravitational stresses, might be cited as the verbal counterpart of a non-verbal response to reality . . .

(McCaffery, *North of Intention* 34-35)

Pictorializing the text. Linking the body's experience to our words as they inscribe us. These texts move against systems of inscription-as-oppression. [The Noh Theatre guy on CBC says that clarity is limiting]. Located within space and time, McCaffery's lexical and graphemic re-visions of written histories perform – as rebus and retrograde.

[A]ttack language at its point of silence and demand speech from it.

(McCaffery, *North of Intention* 36)

Translate or you will be translated (McCaffery). The moment of a word is an instance of bifurcation in which the authority of name dispenses into the fluidity of object. It is the occurrence of change to something else.

*Le poème hurlait.* ( Brossard, *Picture Theory* 40 )

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T – Here are some passages from Bernstein's "Panoptical Artifice" (*Open Letter* 6:9:87) that seem to be in conversation with our exchange. I don't have time to comment right now, but I would like to quarrel with this a little.

Textual features such as "paragrams" must be understood as semantic elements that contribute to the "total image complex" of the poem, to use Veronica Forrest-Thompson's term. McCaffery can sometimes seem to be saying the reverse: that such features undermine the ability of language to mean. In fact, what McCaffery is undermining is not meaning but sclerotized (noneroticized) ideas of meaning.

In contrast, McCaffery's conception of a libidinal energy in writing that can "exceed (in the sense of transcend!) the linguistic" is based on the idea, attributed to Kristeva and others, that there is a prelinguistic, presymbolic domain that is systematically repressed with the acquisition of language: an idea that is the last outpost of Romantic ideology in poststructuralist doxa. Rather, the linguistic or semantic or symbolic order are coterminous with the body, its coming into being

and its expiration. The presymbolic is, at best, a u-topian projection, out of this world (like Romanticism's nonsocial Imagination): literally nowhere, never.

Moreover, the designation of the visual, acoustic, & syntactic elements of a poem as "meaningless," especially insofar as this is conceptualized as positive or liberating – & this is a common habit of much current critical discussion of syntactically nonstandard poetry – is symptomatic of a desire to evade responsibility for meaning's total, & totalizing, reach; as if meaning was a husk that could be shucked off or a burden that could be bucked. Meaning is not a use value as opposed to some other kind of value, but more like valuation itself; & even to refuse value is a value & a sort of exchange. Meaning is nowhere bound to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility.

. . . the meaning of which I speak is not meaning as we may "know" it, with a recuperable intention or purpose. Such a restricted sense of meaning is analogous to the restricted senses of knowledge as stipulatively definable . . . As McCaffery puts it, "such features of general economic operation do not destroy the order of meaning, but complicate & unsettle its constitution and operation." They destroy, that is, not meaning but various utilitarian and essentialist ideas about meaning.

These comments are partly intended as caution against thinking of formally active poems, such as McCaffery's, as eschewing content or meaning – even in the face of the difficulty of articulating just what this meaning is. That is, the meaning is not absent or deferred but self-embodied as the poem in a way that is not transferable to another code or rhetoric.

C – Is being "beyond anxiety" an authentic reading experience? I don't think I ever read this bit by Bernstein. But Bernstein's second paragraph is exactly what I was getting at in regards to Kristeva and Barthes. Except that I don't think it is the "last outpost of Romantic ideology in poststructuralist doxa". There are others. Actually, I don't have any quarrel with this. I think he's basically right on. I like what Bernstein means re: meaning. Just wonder why McCaffery lets people use the word "meaning" so glibly on his book blurb. I'm not sure though about the last sentence – that self-embodied poem-meaning is not necessarily transferable to another code or rhetoric. Seems to me that part of the "responsibility" of language is that it will be transferred (not directly, or "correctly", but still moved – and that that IS its totalizing reach) like it or not.

I've been reading Zukofsky and he says this (and I like it as it explains nicely why all notions of non-referentiality and post-meaningness aren't very useful, and it is toward what I meant when I wrote that form has meaning and meaning has form (Beckett says the same thing in *Disjecta*):

In poetry the poet is continually encountering the facts which in the making seem to want to disturb the music and yet the music or the movement cannot exist without the facts, without its facts. ("Prepositions" 18)

It [good poetry] is precise information on existence out of which it grows, and information of its own existence, that is the movement (and tone) of words.  
("A Statement for Poetry" 20)

I'd extend the list there with the graphic.

T – I've been reading McCaffery pretty intensely and trying to deal with that reading experience, mainly. What happens when one reads these texts (and when I say "these texts" I mean back to Stein, even). For me it's not a matter of interpretation, even frustrated. The texts don't slow me down the way Zukofsky does, say, or such. And yet there's a pleasure. I recently read a "close reading" of "Writing Sand Reading" (is that what it's called, in the last section, from *The Cheat of Words?*) by Perloff (in *Sulfur*) and it seemed very odd to me.

Why? Because the last frontier of such reading is the unconscious, no? And there does not seem to be an unconscious at work here. Or, it's the "semiotic" that's at work. But that must be a version of the unconscious, the real, at least in a pulsional model.

C – I've read the Perloff, but long ago.

I guess you could call it unconscious. But not if we think of the semiotic as encompassing the symbolic. Then it becomes a conscious kind of unconscious, whatever that might be. These terms so troublesome. Needing to be unpacked.

T – But the unconscious does encompass the conscious.

Anyway, how could you have-a close reading (interpretation, hermeneutic) of an aleatory work?

C – An attended reading? Turning the mind. Or

*amor fati*

fat love whereby

"one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it . . . but love it."  
(Nietzsche)

That's from *Ecce Homo*, "Why Am I So Clever?" Which I haven't read, but an interesting title in the light of stupidity. But Nietzsche says that idealism is mendaciousness in the face of the necessary.

*Amor fati* seems pretty idealistic. But maybe not when it comes to poetry. Vico says that poetry is the language of necessity. Maybe what you are doing is attending to the necessary. If meaning resides inside the box of permanence, then *Seven Pages Missing* is necessary but not because it's post meaning so much as meaning outside the box of permanence.

The mind is then turned outside and into the cold, the cold of poetry (Hejiniian).

Maybe the words “close” and “reading” don’t work. What if it’s an attended reading. The turning of the mind to be present with, to accompany, or the Latin *tendu*, stretch. A *tendu* reading. A stretching reading. Then too with “attend” is the sense of time that comes from waiting. Extension and *durée* – Bergson.

T – I’m not saying that this work is simply aleatory – but it does function that way. Doesn’t it?

C – Do you mean depending on uncertainty and contingency for significance which then must also be a significance of significance’s absence?

T – I guess the kind of interpretation that remains open is functional, or sociological – or better, political, even almost pragmatic.

C – I think so. I mean, I think I think so. That is if I have any idea what you are talking about. That if it is utterly pragmatic to have the boxes of meaning defined and so betrayed. Very functional. The way a chair is. How else can we continue to mean? Is that what you mean?

T – The political representations of (“so called”) language poetry, or, more importantly, the polemics, the expressed political program, always seemed to me to constitute a pragmatics.

C – But then what is A Practical Effect. In *Radical Passivity*, Thomas Karl Wall writes about Levinas writing about poetry as the dead husband on the apartment floor that the wife continues to live with. The daily routine unhindered by his corpse – wrapped in a rug. In fact, not only unhindered but actually and necessarily facilitated. But poetry as a dead husband, wrapped in a rug on the dining room floor for days and then weeks means that the idea of pragmatism has to be re-said.

T – I’m left feeling stupid before the fact. I feel like I asked and answered these questions twenty-five years ago. The eternal return.

C – Sometimes I find that I have answered these questions – in old notebooks – but forget or shift and then have to start all over again and so answer them, or not, endlessly. Which is something that Hejiniian says about writing the same thing all your life. Which is entirely different from writing what you know.

T – Yes.

I agree with you that what we have to deal with is the question of meaning and its status in this work. This *kind* of work, this *métier*. I've also really wanted, for a long time, to work out the differences between Lisa, say, and Jeff [Derksen], say, to take two iconic examples (I mean their writing of course), in the larger context of metaphor and metonymy (I mean those concepts in their structuralist and post-structuralist inflation – this is shorthand, here). This was to be a counter-attack on the Klobucar/Barnholden intro to *Writing Class*.

C – Yes, I wonder how many there are out there. Very interesting. Really crucial for me now. I've been thinking a lot about how Lisa and Catriona [Strang] differ. Spending a great deal of time with *Low Fancy*. But Jeff. So much that waits to be articulated. Is that what you mean by unconscious? Is the unconscious all that which awaits articulation? Whatever it is presents itself like an ache. Does the unconscious hurt?

T – Nope, I'm orthodox in this regard. The unconscious is structured like a language, but nothing in the unconscious can ever be articulated. In fact, nothing in the unconscious can ever become conscious.

Here's something I wrote last week. I feel particularly stupid about the bit on the unconscious – but then maybe I just said it better above, with less effort.

Negation misses the positivity of sundials. I woke up dreaming, the other-day, that there can be no hermeneutics of this writing. That seemed quite profound to me, in the momentary way that a *kif* thought does, or like the pleasure of the poetic word, fading. That first sentence, above. I remained under an imperative to write out the thoughts I'd woken with, but could never find a moment with a note pad. And now it's almost too late.

But look, “the positivity of sundials” admits interpretation, because it's a symptom, at the very least. And the unconscious operates according to a logic, a rhetoric and a grammar. Erasing the subject also erases the unconscious. So there's no way back to intention, or even unintention. There often isn't even an effect of meaning. Maybe that's because the writing is so entirely metonymic. Metonyms generate other words, part words, not other thoughts.

No polyvalence, no polyguity. Just this discordant music of word objects. No accumulation, no capital. “2. two. too. to. 2wo.” (155) Alliteration, alteration, aeration, ratio, to.

C – You say “metonyms generate other words not other thoughts.” But what is language, what are words, but thinking? Maybe there has to be another word for it. When I read “2.



two. too. to. 2wo.” it generates thoughts, thinking, meaning accumulates making associations – more metonyms. Metonyms are thoughts? Aren’t they. I mean, I KNOW what you mean. But.

T – Try again?

The notion of fragment privileges the ontic, and my interest in this work is kinetic, more specifically the subjection of the instance of meaning to dynamic forces, in which syntax gets reconfigured as a passage through transitory semantic assemblages in a constant becoming . . . I try to apply this [Deleuze and Guattari’s concept] to a notion of “becoming meaning,” a movement that is constantly and simultaneously thwarted and promoted.

(McCaffery, in *Philly Talks 17*)

Maybe this is what I wanted to say.

C – According to Judith Butler this is how ALL language works all the time – no matter how it is presented. Every instance of language is this moment of constant becoming in which movement is constantly and simultaneously thwarted and promoted. This, according to Butler, is the only way that meaning can occur. (See *Excitable Speech* and *Bodies that Matter*.)

So, say within Butler’s idea of language and how it means, you could say that McCaffery is accelerating an already activated process. Making plain what most writing systems work to hide.

\* \* \*

T – We need to talk about the gnomonic bits.

consider the page not as a space but as a death occurring in  
the gap between  
'writing' and 'wanting to say'

(208)

meanings are what we alter  
truths what we displace

(212)

C – These are the fortune cookie bits. They are very intentional. Very meant to mean. Or else undo themselves with their excess of pith. Something you’d stamp on t-shirt.

T – There’s more.

provide the context and the content will always happen  
(224)

that general pestilence called meaning  
(238)

first define good writing as a form of bad reading  
then earn the right to write  
(230)

never read  
never write  
always continue to learn  
(232)

C – But they are funny.

the steel wheel “rolls” but  
a wheel made of butter goes  
on rolls  
(151)

T – Again, see *Sulfur*, Perloff’s close reading of “Writing Sand Reading”

and

But it is not our wish to reproduce  
ourselves through you  
the reader,  
nor to reassure you that these words are true  
or where the line breaks there is a meaning  
stabilized by that news  
speech is assuring you  
our plans are still the same  
as when we met original in formal theory  
by the fridge on the streetcar  
beneath some baggage of your satisfactions.

(*The Cheat of Words*, 105)

Reading aloud from “Organized Happiness,” realized the continuity of his project, made visible in this white tomb. Requires proper diction and an English tone.

Or is it just hearing his voice, as one hears Joyce, mimes Joyce, when reading *Finnegan’s Wake*, aloud?

C – What about writing as thanotopractic (451): writing as an economy of death and absence. The writer becomes dead to the work on completion. When I read him reading himself in my head he gets in the way.

T – But there’s a particular prosody and structured syntax, of the 17th Century, from “Newton’s Optics” to “Teachable Texts”. Take this, for instance, and count:

Belief thus blocks behind  
generic’s relative ambitions  
still specific to this weather’s heat  
    but writ from evidence  
attractive to the terms we lay  
upon aspersions of preferment.

(398)

There’s number, but no argument here. It’s antithetic. But there is a grammar. One could interpolate “meaningful” words – “Belief thus bides behind / the prince’s relative ambition,” etc. But one can’t draw the words down from the surface into a coherence, one or more layers of meaning. Joyce’s text does insist upon interpretation, can be misread. McCaffery seems to say that once intention is removed – if that’s possible outside of pure chance procedures – then there can be no misreadings. Or at least he says that some of the time – see 202, “A Short Cup Poem.” Or see *North of Intention*, 45, fn. 3, where he interprets Michael Palmer’s lines “After waking he / waited” as descriptive of post-funeral servitude. This “interpretation” is offered to demonstrate the indeterminacy of the sentence. But surely there are things he would not want his sentences to be seen as saying?

C – I’m not sure. I think it depends on the piece. The text is at times even instructive. For example, the stuff from “Knowledge Never Knew.” Instructive. Words to live by. Write by. Much of the time it’s a story about the unmeaning of meaning, the shifting nothingness of the subject. Often it is very meaningful and purposeful. Is that the same thing?

T – He has several models of reading. Another one is articulated in his piece on Bissett where he posits an “anti-reading that would affirm a motion, not comprehend a sense.” He also calls this an “affirmative reading” (*North of Intention* 102-103).

C – Yes, affirming a motion. That’s nice. Every way oakly. Poetry as ride.

T – I think this is what I was trying to say earlier when I spoke of a reading that’s not slowed by the text, that remains on the surface, or what you were pointing to still earlier when you called upon Barthes’ “pleasure of the text.” It also seems to me that the often invoked “materiality of the text,” as it’s played out in object writing, phenomenological writing, from Stein to Ponge to McCaffery, insists upon a surface reading, along a plane, or drawn through knots, or across *plateaux*, or constantly driven back to a surface from folds (see Deleuze, *Du Sens*).

C – Transforming comprehension into perception (443). The focus on seeing also works with your not-slowed surface reading. Reading as seeing. He’s big on that. So it is anti-immersional (see “Storax” 318). That way you can experience the perception. Perceive the perception. Percept not concept. This is Vico. And Lisa. Surfaces. Perceive meaning’s capricious bent. Like intimate distortions, “the scene seen” (138).

a new criterion for jocular deviance  
(422)

But perception is better than comprehension? Surface verses depth. What is the difference? Is one more clear. Less cluttered. Though a surface can get very cluttered. And off topic somewhat, why do we privilege awareness? Another fetish. I wonder about that.

Re: McCaffery and word as mud. (There is Levinas in here too: the obscurity of love.) Isn’t perception comprehension and representation constructive, performative? And reference too. How else could it be? Doesn’t this book illustrate that? Everywhere McCaffery goes language is already there or it takes him. Takes him to note the turns but I don’t think this book is beyond the usual conditions of meaning, it’s more like an acute inhabitation of.

“What I did was set up the sufficient conditions for any open field to form into which a word could find its own way settling into its own syntactic space and thereby determining the meaning of that space.” (442)

He writes that re: “Dr. Sandhu’s Muffins” (which I love), and this too:

present[ing] language-material without the intrusion of my own consciousness . . . to write poems that were mutually revelatory to both reader and writer . . . the accurate transcription of a pure perceptual process of the writer functioning as reader . . . the poems became transcriptions of the movement of the moment of actual observation. (442)

T – Perhaps one way to approach this (the question of models of reading – as a way of getting at that other question of interpretation, or the nature of meaning) would be to take the selection from “Knowledge Never Knew,” halfway through *Seven Pages Missing*

(perhaps one of the missing “pages” is actually the waiter in Palmer’s poem – see above), as a guide.

C – That is an interesting post-meaning or even surface reading idea – a guide. And it is guide-like: “to write is to reach a surface through the holes named things” (205). How does that work with thanopractic writing? A dead guide? Yep, that works if you think of Wall and the dead husband on the rug and the wife that leaves him there because his presence lets her mark the movement of her day. That works.

T – Well, I was going to try to do this at this point, use the gnomics of “Knowledge Never Knew” as a guide – and actually I think it would provide a good pivot for the whole thing we’re working on here – but later, later – and then I want to say something about the political, along the lines of the following.

When I spoke of pragmatics earlier, I was thinking about the political claims of this writing. These claims have to do entirely with practice (with pragmatics), again on various models: semanalytic, schizanalytic, a general economy, a libidinal economy, etc. The act of writing, and equally the act of reading (“never read / never write / always continue to learn,” 232) as itself a political practice . . . (here compelled to re-read Rossi-Landi’s “Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato” but found after twenty pages or so that this was more than I could encompass in the space of a whim) . . .

C – Maybe you should try Rossi-Landi in English? I read him years ago via Silliman. Sentence as tool. Nice.

T – Just realized in cold walk to coffee shop that the enactment of the political at the level of the word, or rather, simply, within language (from distinctive features to discourse), or let’s say within poetic practice, works always by analogy to actual political practice (action), or just maybe is a form of such practice – it’s a stretch, but this can be argued – AND is also somehow always in dialectical relation to that earlier, romantic and post-romantic, sense of the word as revolutionary, in which the word, a poetic, operates in relation to spirit – i.e. objectivism (language poetry) is a reversal of, or better still works within the gambit of, symbolism, just as our socialisms, our communism, works within the structures of the spiritual, the utopian – or to be Derridean, the traces of metaphysics (still trying to read Rossi-Landi last night – he doesn’t say any of this, but maybe prompted these thoughts – want to work this line a little . . .)

ambit not gambit

C – I looked up gambit in my very small 1959 Oxford: noun. “a chess term” “an opening with sacrifice of piece”. It’s some kind of conversation. With big gaps. In time and in direction. I don’t think a gambit can be dialectical.

But it doesn’t matter. What else would be better? Though sometimes. I can’t always figure out what the hell you are talking about. Which works. Words are mud, as obscure

as love. This is Levinas' idea that the subject exists in a relation that is non-appropriative. Alterity is not subsumed, difference is left intact. It must be. We are always other to each other, to ourselves.

Re: "an enactment of politics" – do you mean that because societal power relations are present in our language structures, a poetic practice that seeks to expose, undermine, rearrange these relations (never read/ never write/ always continue to learn) is analogous to, or a form of actual political activism – strikes, armed resistance, demonstrations – and that this analogy works both within and without the romantic ideal of the word as revolutionary? That is, without because the focus is not on the transcendent spiritual value of the word, but on an active practice of language within which the authority of the writer is displaced – not rendered to the winds of an Edmund Burkian sublime, but given over to a reader and his or her relationship with the text – so that meaning is in an active, actual and consensual activity. But within, because we cannot ever fully escape the barbed wire of western metaphysics?

When you say spirit do you mean transcendent?

When you say romantic do you mean Percy Bysshe?

I don't think I'd say that it is analogous to, but maybe a form of. It is something. To wrestle the smug laurels off meaning is something.

But it leads to depression, nudity, piles, curvature of the spine, indecision and embarrassment.

Spent much of yesterday with *Seven Pages Missing*. Last night too. Some of it so so fucking absolutely amazing. Then some not so. Or not *not* so but suffocating. Read his "explanations" at the back. Similar problem here though. What does it mean to "discard description" (440) or why is viewing language as "pure, graphic materiality" a "defetishizing strategy" (440)? I mean, I think I know what he means, but how can we stay there? And why would we? After Stein – *Tender Buttons*, *Stanzas in Meditation* etc. Why should "description" lie wrapped in that nasty old sheet despite all its un-wrappings. Where is the "political" here if we don't actually change the way we word? And it seems that McCaffery's "pure graphic materiality" is fetishizing. I think some of his ideas are Romantic, problematic. Where is the practice in pure? Plus I want to turn and retrieve the fetish. Why shouldn't rubber boots be an object of sexual affection? Is it even possible not to fetishize? But maybe this makes all discussion impossible. But maybe it's just the *tendu* of an attendant reading. The turning. His own criticism of *Broken Mandela* is its "failure to move this clash of linguistic dispositions (material sign on the one hand and idealist referentiality on the other) beyond staged representation and into an effective form of immanent critique. So, the work remains theatrical and on that account still of a representational nature" (440). I'd argue that theatricality necessarily disrupts the nature of representability. But I think what he means is that it's not much of a gambit. Not many openings there. And that is true I think. It still needs words. Still, I like them. I also like

the typesetting. I like how it *graphemes* the text, especially in places like the gorgeous redwood suite.

\* \* \*

## CODA

C – I'm a little Anti Coleridge these days. Samuel is always on about how the world of phenomena is mere husk and must entirely disappear so that formal laws alone remain. Blah blah. Stab out the eyes if you want to really see. Blah blah. Sort of deal. But his poetry is nice: Demon lovers etc.

Here is what Longinus says – another anti material sort:

Evil are the swellings both in the body and in diction.

What was it? Were they all just pissed off cause the material looks like it's really there – swelling and such, but doesn't pan out? That is what is so great about Vico and maybe what I like about McCaffery too. Meaning erupts of this extreme crash of stupid humans with raw world matter and so the stupid humans make up stories about the raw matter that reminds the stupid humans of themselves (origin as recognition). Thus science, knowledge, philosophy, abstract thought, meaning, and the world are nothing but the enormous energy of absolute ignorance, stuff and collision. And Vico says that *that* is sublime.

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