line

seven/eight

I hear a banging on the door of the night
Buzz, buzz; buzz, buzz; buzz, buzz
If you open the door does it let in light?
Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz; buzz, buzzz.

If the day appears like a yellow raft
Meow, meow; meow, meowww
Is it really on top of a yellow giraffe
Meow, meow, meow, meow. Meow, meow

If the door caves in as the darkness slides
Knocking and knocking; knock, knock, knock
What can tell the light of whatever inside?
Knocking and knocking; knock, knock, knock

Or the light and the darkness dance in your eye
Shades we falling one by one
Pigs, and cats, and open sky
Dancers falling one by one
Dancers shrieking one by one.

spring/fall 1986

line

seven/eight

A Journal of Contemporary Writing
and its Modernist Sources

Published in co-operation with
The Contemporary Literature Collection
Simon Fraser University Library
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia

spring/fall 1986

Line is published twice a year, spring and fall. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and Canadian postage to ensure return. Subscription rates: $12/year for individuals; $16/year for institutions; single copies $8. Donors of $25/year or more will receive a complimentary annual subscription and an official receipt for income tax purposes.

As a journal published in co-operation with The Contemporary Literature Collection, *Line* will reflect the range of the collection. Contents will be related to the line of post-1945 Canadian, American, and British writers whose work issues from, or extends, the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.

Correspondence address: *Line*
c/o English Department
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia
V5A 1S6 Canada

Grateful acknowledgement to the Koerner Foundation for a grant to cover a portion of the publication costs of this issue.

We would like to thank the following: Ed Van Aelstyn, David Bromige and Jim Koller for additional information about the *Northwest Review;* Michael McClure and Jonathan Williams for permission to reproduce their letters; John Martin of Black Sparrow Press for permission to reproduce the letter by Charles Bukowski; George Butterick, Executor of the Charles Olson Estate, for permission to reproduce a section of a letter by Charles Olson; Robin Blaser, Executor of the Jack Spicer Estate, for permission to reproduce manuscripts by Jack Spicer. Thanks also to Warren Tallman for assistance in preparing the article on the *Northwest Review*.

The photographic work was done by the Graphics Department, SFU.

Cover: Jack Spicer manuscript in Special Collections, SFU.

ISSN 0820-9081

contents

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

The release of this double issue of *Line* is an occasion for both apology and celebration. It marks for us the 4th anniversary of the journal—though with regrets that the spring issue was delayed as we struggled to adapt to the use of new editing and production procedures. Now we're working with a Macintosh computer and a laser printer, hoping in this way to survive the next four years! Why single out the 4th year? Well, in a sense, the initial phase of *Line* appears to be leading to new possibilities. When we began, we wanted to become primarily a vehicle for an active readership—a kind of readership aligned to the concerns of the line of contemporary writing tracing its ties to modernist sources. We plan to keep moving in this direction, but now we also want to open space to writers writing the prose and the poems which are creating our present. We think *Line* desires this extension to give it space to keep moving.

For this double issue, we are featuring Talonbooks, our own west coast publishing house which has—during the past two decades—continued to resist the transparency of the bland in B.C. by giving us writing that matters. SFU houses the archive of this major Canadian literary press, and *Line* is pleased to offer a Talonbooks bibliography in celebration of 20 years of books. The interview/conversation with Jim Brown by poet/publisher Barry McKinnon, a contributor to a former issue of *Line*, gives us a personal perspective on Talonbooks' beginnings; the two letters of Karl Siegler, President of Talonbooks, taken from the SFU archives present a microcosm of the struggles to keep the literary flame alive on the west coast. McKinnon's piece, which initially suggested a Talonbooks section, is part of a work in progress of interviews with writers who were editors of small presses or magazines. Siegler, the publisher, is also an accomplished translator whose translation of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* is still available from Talonbooks. The Talonbooks bibliography (up to 1977) was compiled by Jean Cockburn for her thesis, "The Origins and Development of Talon Books Publishing House" (University of Alberta, 1978); Mary Schendlinger of Talonbooks updated the bibliography to the present. . . . Juliet McLaren, Ph.D. student in the English Department at SFU, draws on fascinating documents in the *Coyote's Journal* archive in Special Collections to describe the crisis generated by *The Northwest Review* in Eugene, Oregon back in 1964. . . . Interviews for some reason became an important part of this issue. Kevin Power's conversation with Robert Duncan is a slightly shortened version of the one published in the Spanish journal, *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, accepted by *Line* to ensure that Duncan's remarks are available to North American readers. Power who sent us his piece from the Canary Islands is a poet, critic and editor; a recent book of poems *La Noche*, with Jaime Gimenez de Haro, was

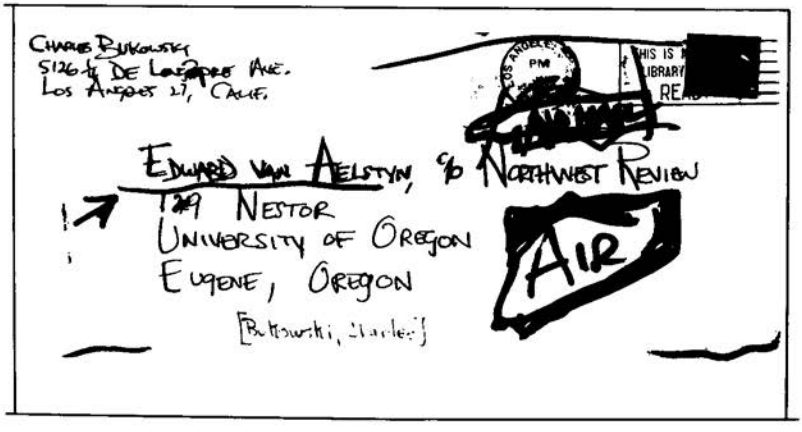
published by Voctor Orenga , Valencia; his *Conversaciones con pintores* is available from the Instituto Juan Gil Albert, Alicante. Duncan's *Ground Work* and his critical essays in *Fictive Certainties* are both available from New Directions. . . . Daniel Lenoski sent us his lively interview with Dennis Cooley from Winnipeg where he teaches in the English Department of the University of Manitoba; Cooley's recently published long poem *Bloody Jack,* the focus of the interview, is available from Turnstone Press. . . . Steve McCaffery's collected critical essays, *North of Intention*, has recently appeared from Nightwood Edition (Canada) and Roof Books (USA). . . . And yes, the rumour is true, bpNichol's *Zygal* is available from Coach House . . . . Larry Price sent us his thoughtful review/commentary on Charles Bernstein's *Content's Dream* from San Francisco. . . . Diane Relke recently completed a Ph.D. thesis on early 20th century Canadian women writers. . . . Finally, we're delighted to publish a hefty excerpt from Lewis Ellingham's massive in-progress biography of Jack Spicer, now titled *Poet, Be Like God* . . . . For the interest of our readers, we've reproduced the manuscript of Jack Spicer's "Poems for the Vancouver Festival" in SFU's Special Collections—a sequence recalling, in the margin of images out of the 1960s, that intermingling of American and Canadian which appeared in moments as this issue came together.

Our fall issue for 1987 is being planned as a special issue of essays devoted to bpNichol's long and wonderful poem *The Martyrology.* We will also feature manuscripts of the poem in SFU's Special Collections, and bp has promised to send us the most recent writing from this continuing Canadian epic. At this point, it looks as if this special issue will be co-published with Talonbooks. Many readers have already agreed to contribute, but there is still some room for further surprises. Inquiries are welcome. Deadline for manuscripts: April 1, 1987.

RM
November 15, 1986

Brief Season:

The Northwest Review Crisis



JULIET McLAREN

Brief Season: *The Northwest Review* Crisis

In the mid-seventies, the Contemporary Literature Collection of Simon Fraser University Library acquired the archive of a short-lived but influential little magazine, *Coyote's Journal*. Included in this material was a quantity of letters and manuscripts from *Coyote's* source and predecessor, *The Northwest Review*. During 1962 and 1963, *The Northwest Review*, a student journal published at the University of Oregon, was under the editorship of an energetic graduate student—Edward Van Aelstyn. Together with a team of associate and assistant editors, Van Aelstyn began to extend and enrich the contents and quality of *NwR*. What was at the beginning of his tenure a fairly standard university journal with a strong west coast orientation, had become by the winter of 1963-64 an iconoclastic and adventurous quarterly with a relatively radical political and literary content. The consequences of this activity were not surprising. The journal drew a great deal of favourable attention from poets, academics and political liberals; it also became a focal point for the anger of right-wing extremists, dissatisfied with affairs at the University of Oregon. Eventually Van Aelstyn and his fellow editors were fired, the *NwR* was suspended and control of it transferred from the Student Publications Board to the faculty.

Another result of the suppression of *NwR* was perhaps less predictable. Three of the young editors began an off-campus 'little magazine' of extraordinary accomplishment; they named it, *Coyote's Journal*, and during the next three years it became one of the most important outlets on the west coast for new and distinguished poetry and prose publishing. This first of two selections from the archive, augmented by recent telephone conversations with two of the original editors of *Coyote*, recalls the crisis at *NwR* and illustrates both *NwR*'s flowering and its demise.

The transformation of *NwR* came about through a blend of the energy and ambition of its editors—to make it 'the best university publication in the country'—and some felicitious circumstances: Van Aelstyn's meeting and friendship with David Bromige in 1962, a transplanted English-Canadian about to undertake graduate study at UC Berkeley; the Vancouver Poetry Conference of 1963, which Van Aelstyn and Bromige attended and where Ed met Philip Whalen and came under the influence of Robert Creeley and

Charles Olson; *NwR*'s active editorial policy through which they solicited manuscripts from poets, politicians and interesting new writers; the budget to pay for submissions and the facilities of the University of Oregon for attractive design, presentation, typesetting and art reproduction.

At the end of 1961, the *NwR* was publishing the poetry of William Stafford, Earle Birney, William Dickey and John William Corrington, as well as that of relatively unknown local writers. When Van Aelstyn and Robert Fraser—the editor for poetry—took over the journal, they continued to be interested in this work and in adding the poems of Malcolm Lowry and Beat poets such as Charles Bukowski to this group. At this time the *NwR* depended almost entirely upon submissions for its content, but by early 1962 the editors had decided upon a more active policy, writing to potential contributors, exchanging with other little magazines and soliciting manuscripts that would improve the journal and generate a larger readership. Through this new editorial approach, Van Aelstyn began to publish the work of Richard Sassoon and (a little later) William Wantling. By the summer of 1963 *NwR*'s roster of poets included Gary Snyder, Ed Dorn, Margaret Randall and Josephine Miles.

The friendship Van Aelstyn formed with Bromige in early 1962 was useful in helping to form Van Aelstyn's taste, as David's letters show the direction his own interests were taking at this time:

> Creeley came here [Berkeley] (on a week's leave from UBC) to read poetry 2 weeks ago, & believe me he was good! I'd heard him read before & hadn't been too impressed, but this time he really turned on, it was moving, I tell you! Next day he was due to come into the poetry-class I'm auditing from Thom Gunn . . . & lo! & behold, in behind Creeley bounced Robert Duncan! It was the best class yet. . . . . (3 November 1962)

Bromige's interests and responses were infectious. Van Aelstyn began his own correspondence with Creeley, to which the poet replied with courtesy but not immediately with poems for *NwR*. In February 1963 Creeley wrote in a postscript, "I enclose notice of a summer workshop we are having here with the thought it might be of possible interest to some people there . . . ." The contacts from the Vancouver conference were to become both a source of trouble at *NwR* and the impetus for the future direction of *Coyote's Journal*.

In the autumn of 1963, Bromige was assistant editor for poetry and *NwR* was publishing, or had plans to publish, work by Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Charles Olson, Ron Loewinsohn and other writers included in Don Allen's *New American Poetry*.

IS Olson contributing to NWR? if so, wow! the issue after next could be a dilly.

1. spose [sic] Snyder submitted again.
2. " Dorn did.
3. " Whalen sends us something good.
4. " Ron Loewinsohn (see NAP. a fine, very young poet, I met last week) sends something good . . . .

(Bromige letter to Van Aelstyn, 4 September 1963)

But by the end of the year more radical changes were occurring. There were budget constraints. Bromige was about to be replaced as poetry editor by James Koller, a young poet then living in rural Washington who had submitted new work to *NwR*. And the *Review* was preparing its most daring issue for the press. The Fall 1963 issue (IV: iv) included the first English language publication of Antonin Artaud's "To Have Done With the Judgement of God," translated by Guy Wernham, and introduced by Michael McClure; a lengthy selection of Philip Whalen's poetry; a long interview with Fidel Castro; and photographs of post-revolutionary Cuba taken by a leftist Vancouver poet named Roger Prentice. Van Aelstyn had received a copy of the Artaud piece from Allen Ginsberg and a copy of Wernham's translation from Michael McClure. By publishing the complete work, *NwR* scored an undoubted literary triumph. The letter sent by George Bowering was typical of many:

> Dear Editors of NWR: Congratulations! With the last two issues I have seen (the one with poems by Dorn & Snyder, and the recent Castro-Whalen-Artaud issue) and the promise of great things to come (Olson), you have changed NWR from a competent but featureless periodical to a magazine of great excitement and significance . . . . (12 March 1964)

For the *Review*, however, the release of the Fall 1963 issue in January 1964 could hardly have been worse timed. As some of the staff tried to point out to Van Aelstyn, sexuality, sedition, and blasphemy all at once was too heady a mixture for that time and place. What made the trouble worse was that publication coincided with a controversial film showing on the Eugene campus, for which Van Aelstyn was partly responsible. In December 1962, Gerd Stern, a San Francisco poet and film-maker, had written to him asking for help:

> I have been asked to do a program . . . at the Vancouver Arts Festival [in January]. I am very anxious to go there particularly because Marshall McLuhan will be there . . . . [The University of

BC] fee and expenses barely covers the trip. Would there be any possibility of doing something in Eugene?? . . . [I could show] a film "Y"—a 16mm highway and figure study which I'm just completing with Ivan Majdrakoff and will show at Vancouver.

The screening came to the attention of a vocal and politically active minority of fundamentalist Christian taxpayers, who proceeded to engulf the University and its President, Arthur Flemming, in a sea of political agitation that ultimately swamped *NwR*. While poets and those interested in new writing were sending letters of praise for the quality and daring of *NwR*, it was in serious trouble at the University. In spite of the formation of a Faculty Committee for Academic Freedom, the protests of the editorial staff, and a flood of letters from academics, writers and public figures praising *NwR*—including a five page "manifesto" from Charles Olson—the political attacks on the *NwR* and the University continued. They were led by a local citizen, who circulated a petition calling for the dismissal of the University's President, and backed by a right-wing newsletter published in Portland.

President Flemming was asked to appear twice before the Oregon State Legislature to explain the use or misuse of public funds for the journal. Faculty members involved with the *NwR* in an advisory capacity, including the Dean of the School of Journalism and Kester Svendsen, Chairman of the Department of English, were requested to submit briefs to a legislative committee on higher education. Finally, in May, a memo from the President's office to the Student Publications Board made the demise of *NwR* as it then was, official: "Responsibility for publishing *The Northwest Review* is hereby transferred from the Student Publications Board to the Faculty Publications Committee. . . . All publication efforts of the Review should cease, effective May 21, 1964."

As an ironic postscript to this decision, the Faculty Committee promptly hired Van Aelstyn to edit *NwR* as a faculty publication. Given the public agitation over its content, this decision could hardly be allowed to stand. Consequently, on June 15 a letter was sent from President Flemming to Ed Van Aelstyn. It read, in part: "I discussed with you last week the possibility of my deciding that no further issue of *The Northwest Review* should be published until after the faculty had had the opportunity of participating in the setting of the objectives for a University of Oregon literary publication. I have now decided that this would be the best course of action." The battle was over, at least as far as the University was concerned.

The censorship furor and final suspension of the journal had destroyed the editors' plan to publish a double issue in the spring of 1964, honouring Charles Olson by reprinting his *Mayan Letters* and other unavailable work.

Olson and Creeley had given the project their blessing; the issue was designed and most of it was typeset. The galleys also included poems by Dorn, Snyder, Enslin, Loewinsohn, Bromige, Creeley and Eigner, to be published as *NwR* had room for them in future issues. The response of the editors was immediate and direct. Three of the staff, Will Wroth, Jim Koller and Van Aelstyn himself had already begun a serious examination of their alternatives and decided to keep right on publishing. Wroth and Van Aelstyn copied the *NwR* 's mailing list and helped themselves to the galleys and manuscripts for the projected Olson issue; Koller searched for funds and low-cost printers; they exchanged ideas through letters and visits (Koller was still living in Washington) and set to work.

Coyote's Journal, #1, appeared at the end of September, 1964. The first issue was received with enthusiasm from those who had delighted in the success of *NwR* and mourned its suppression.

After a lapse of several months, *The Northwest Review* reappeared at the University of Oregon. It included poetry by William Stafford, Earle Birney, John William Corrington and some relatively unknown local writers.

[Note: The next issue of *Line* will include a selection of material from the *Coyote's Journal* correspondence and manuscripts.]

Dear Ed,

How great! YOU ARE VERY CALM CONSIDERING THAT YOU ARE PRINTING IN ENGLISH, FOR THE FIRST TIME, ONE OF THE GREAT DOCUMENTS OF THE MIDDLE OF THE CENTURY! I'm excited! Do I detect a bursting pride in your letter? I was very bothered getting the business letter about reprints of the section without realizing that it meant 32 pages of Artaud. And I thought that you then were using 16 pages in English and 16 pages of the French. Now I must know a few things to make my happiness total and complete. You did get every word of the Artaud into 32 pages? (Ferlinghetti and I fought out this same problem when we put together JOURNAL FOR THE PROTECTION OF ALL BEINGS and I could not overcome him -- and he was paying for the magazine. And I envisioned the second issue being the Artaud book so I let it slip.) (((I was holding out for the sheaf of letters at the end also -- the letters to and from Artaud))

A) You have done no editing or cutting?

B) You have re-arranged lines on the page to match the French?

C) Wernham got full credit as translator?

D) Were you able to print any of the letters at all? (If not then why not run a supplement of the correspondence in the next issue -- including your response to the Artaud document?)

Letter from Michael McClure to Ed Van Aelstyn, 20 December 1963.

I do not want four copies of the magazine I want and need about fifty copies. Send me as many copies as you possibly can -- I would prefer copies of the magazine to reprints but reprints will do.

Please let me know publication date of the issue containing the Artaud and publication date of the issue containing the poem of mine in beast langugge...

I hope you've made available the information that the intro essay on Artaud is from MEAT SCIENCE ESSAYS and published by City Lights.

This will be a monumental moment for America -- the day the Artaud is available -- let's make the most of it. Send me fifty copies. [redacted]

Be sure that you send copies to Barney Rosset, Richard Seaver, Marilyn Meeker & Fred Jordan (one copy each) at Grove Press 64 University Place, New York City. Be sure to send copy to Ferlinghetti, and to J. Laughlin at New Directions. 333 6th Ave New York 14

Write to Ted Wilentz
180 MacDougal Street
NYC
and ~~xx~~ tell him about the Artaud piece and ask him how many copies he wants to order. He runs 8th St. Book Store. Write Ferlinghetti and tell him and ask how many copies he wants. Let me know if I can be of any more help. You should print up a flyer about the Artaud issue and mail it out. If you print a flyer then send me [redacted] 150 copies.

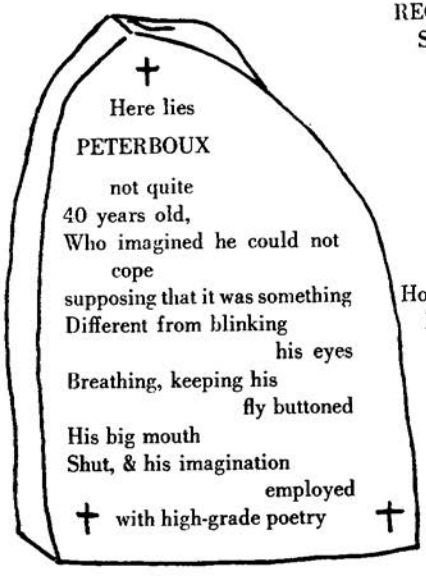
very best,

Michael

this is the evening star.

this is the end of my life 

REQUIESCAT,
Sweetie.



(what's he lying about
now,
for Christ's sake?)
How I love me! How much
I'd give for a divorce
! or simply get very
drunk
PUKE, SPEW,
DEFECATE,
WEEP,
clean up the mess,
take a bath, put on
clean clothing &
start in again upon a
clean sheet of paper

But now, at last, I'll tell you everything,
All that you've always wanted to know,
Those things I've successfully avoided saying,
The innermost secrets, the real W O R D . . .

From Philip Whalen's "Monday, in the Evening, 21: VIII: 61," in the *Northwest Review* (Fall 1963), as reproduced in the *National Eagle*, June 5, 1964.

LID OFF U OF O GARBAGE

THEY'RE PRINTING WHAT ISN'T FIT TO PRINT !!! AT YOUR EXPENSE --

Part I

NATIONAL EAGLE

In Combination with THE NORTHWEST REVIEW, Seattle, Washington

PRICE 10 CENTS PORTLAND, OREGON JUNE 5, 1964 VOL. 3, NO. 3

DR. ARTHUR FLEMMING

with Arthur S. Flemming President of the University of Oregon AS A MAJOR SPONSOR

GOV. MARK HATFIELD

and with ultimate responsibility belonging to MARK O. HATFIELD Governor, State of Oregon and National Convention "Keynoter" for the Republican Party ! !

and with The Rev. Wesley G. Nicholson, Pastor First Congregational Church, Eugene AS A DONOR ! !

NORTHWEST

PUBLISHED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

EDITOR: Edward van Aelstyn

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: William Wroth

ASSISTANT EDITORS: Robert L. Curry, Jr. Dirk Jellema J. Barre Toelken Joan Yeatman

ART EDITOR: Frank Howell

BUSINESS MANAGER: Susan Krutsch

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS: Barbara Rogers, Gabrielle Lambeldorff, Marcia Hudspeth

CONSULTING EDITORS: Edwin R. Bingham, John L. Hulteng, David McCosh, A. K. Weatherhead, Christof Wegelin

Published quarterly by the University of Oregon Student Publications Board. All correspondence should be addressed to *Northwest Review*, 129 Susan L. Campbell Hall, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 97403. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Payment for contributions will be made on acceptance. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Editor or the University. Subscriptions: one year $2.00; two years, $3.50; Donor (two years), $10.00; Sponsor (two years), $25.00. Copyright 1964 by the University of Oregon Student Publications Board.

National distributor: B. DeBoer, 158 High Street, Nutley, New Jersey.

TO ORDER COPIES FOR DISTRIBUTION, SEE PAGE 4

FIRST, LET US ASK YOU A QUESTION:

Do you consider the following fit to print at public expense by the University of Oregon?

WE QUOTE: "Who knows better
2 thousand years of work yourself to death
building God a house
tending God's ducks & pigs
killing God's enemies
KISSING GOD'S ASS"

(See Page 22)

SURELY, YOUR ANSWER IS A SHOCKED "NO" !!

BUT THAT IS ONLY A MILD SAMPLE OF WHAT IS BEING PRINTED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON AT PUBLIC EXPENSE AND IN THE NAME OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM, FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, AND IN THE NAME OF "EDITORIAL INTEGRITY" !!

We refer specifically to a University of Oregon "student" literary periodical called NORTHWEST REVIEW. Such filth, obscenity, and left-ism as this monstrosity contains could not conceivably have been printed without the responsible approval of the university president, Arthur S. Flemming, or without the continued tolerance of Governor Mark O. Hatfield. If the Rev. Wesley G. Nicholson reads and approves what he helps pay for, then that is something for his Church membership to think over.

What kind of church officers and church members have we that allows such sacrilegious and corrupt practices as this? Are church members degenerating into Sodom & Gomorrah protoges? Isn't this to "sin by silence"?

OREGON'S BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION is responsible for Dr. Flemming's appointment and for continuing his influence over our students at the University. Serving on that Board in 1963, were:

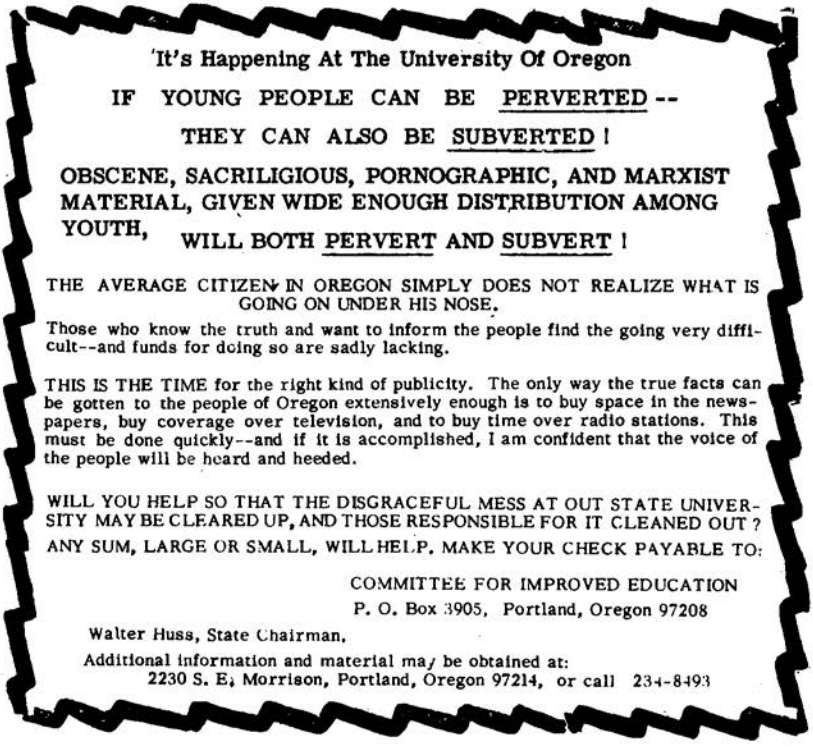
Chairman, William Welsh	Charles Holloway
Mrs. E. B. McNoughton	Doug McKean
Allan Hart	Ralph Purvine
John Merrifield	Elizabeth Johnson

THE AUTHORITY FOR THEIR CONDUCT over the affairs of our University is granted to these people through their APPOINTMENT to the BOARD by the Governor of the State of Oregon, MARK O. HATFIELD, who represents himself both as a CHRISTIAN and as a "MODERATE LIBERAL" !!

We wonder if the Republican Party of this nation was wise to select such a one as its "keynoter" for the forthcoming National Convention in San Francisco in July, 1964.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ???

Front page, *National Eagle*, a Portland, Oregon newsletter which led the public attack on the University of Oregon and the *Northwest Review*.



'It's Happening At The University Of Oregon

IF YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BE PERVERTED --

THEY CAN ALSO BE SUBVERTED !

OBSCENE, SACRILIGIOUS, PORNOGRAPHIC, AND MARXIST MATERIAL, GIVEN WIDE ENOUGH DISTRIBUTION AMONG YOUTH, WILL BOTH PERVERT AND SUBVERT !

THE AVERAGE CITIZEN IN OREGON SIMPLY DOES NOT REALIZE WHAT IS GOING ON UNDER HIS NOSE.

Those who know the truth and want to inform the people find the going very difficult--and funds for doing so are sadly lacking.

THIS IS THE TIME for the right kind of publicity. The only way the true facts can be gotten to the people of Oregon extensively enough is to buy space in the newspapers, buy coverage over television, and to buy time over radio stations. This must be done quickly--and if it is accomplished, I am confident that the voice of the people will be heard and heeded.

WILL YOU HELP SO THAT THE DISGRACEFUL MESS AT OUT STATE UNIVERSITY MAY BE CLEARED UP, AND THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR IT CLEANED OUT ?

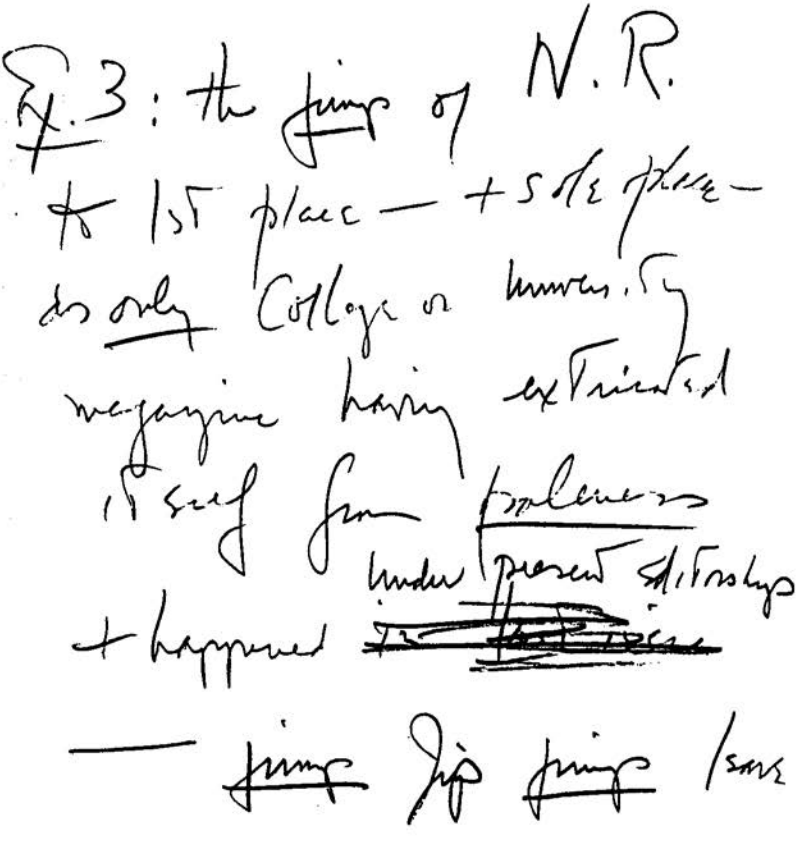
ANY SUM, LARGE OR SMALL, WILL HELP. MAKE YOUR CHECK PAYABLE TO:

COMMITTEE FOR IMPROVED EDUCATION
P. O. Box 3905, Portland, Oregon 97208

Walter Huss, State Chairman.

Additional information and material may be obtained at:
2230 S. E. Morrison, Portland, Oregon 97214, or call 234-8493

Reproduced from p. 6 of the *National Eagle*, July 4, 1964.



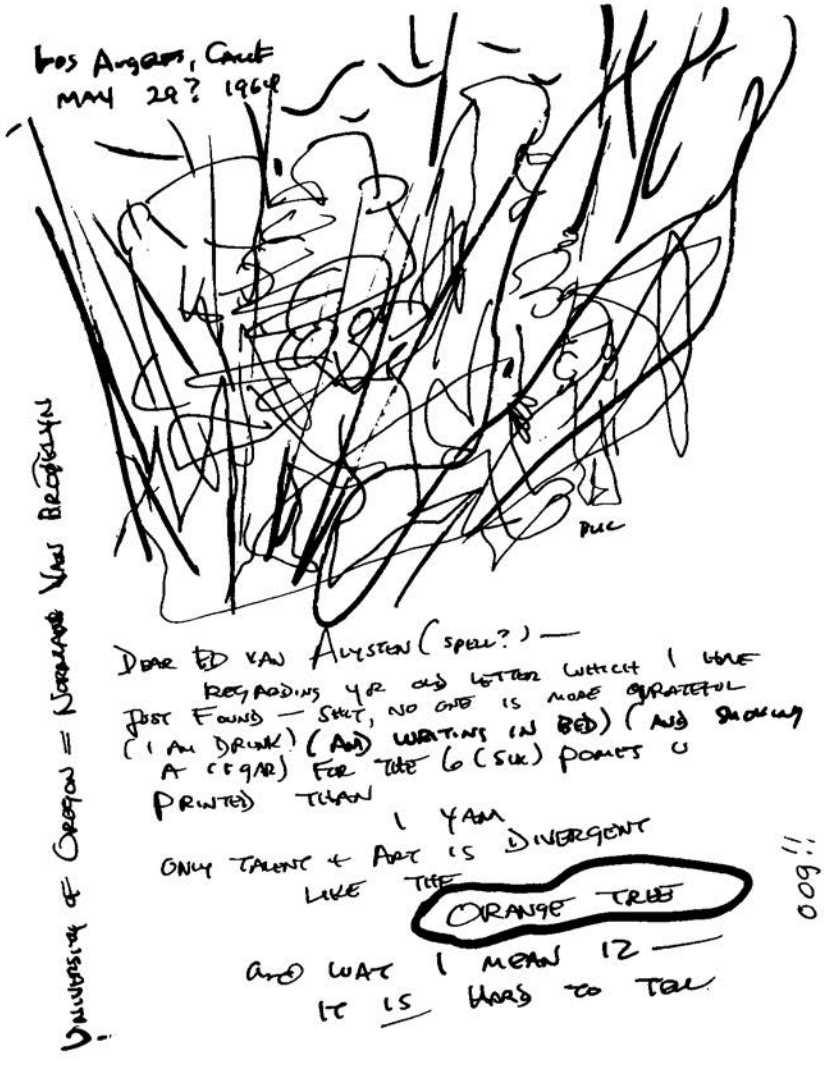
Two pages from Charles Olson's pencilled "manifesto" on behalf of *Northwest Review*, sent to the editors in March, 1964.

Alice + Jerry be No harm may
came to them All the Phileo
Nashes go on

<u>Meanwhile</u>

Any loss of a magazine
<u>which</u> breaks things
is REAL LOSS

<u>Testimonial</u> by Charles Olson
March 7 1964



Letter of sympathy from Charles Bukowski, written May 29, 1964; the envelope is reproduced on the title page of "Brief Season" above.

PAGE 2

IF WE ARE ALL MAD OR ALL

TALENT

OR ALL JUST YEARNING FOR SOME TYPE OF

TIN-EAR

APPLAUSE

BECAUSE WE ARE REALLY NOT AS GOOD OR AS STRONG AS THE BUTCHER OR THE MATADOR OR THE WHORE.

GOD KNOWS AND GOD'S A FINK.

WE'RE OUTA TOILET PAPER

PAGE 3—

YES, I'm DRUNK BUT THAT'S NO EXCUSE FOR MYSELF SO I'LL GO ON TALKING

(WHILE A PREGNANT 43 YEAR-OLD WOMAN HERE — SHIVERING, SLIDES INTO BLACK TIGHTS TO WALK 3 BLOCKS TO GET ME (GOD?) SOME CIGARS.

(CAN YOU READ THIS ??)

I TAKE IT YOU'RE YOUNG + TOUGH + REALISTIC (SPELL?) IDEALISTIC — WHICH MEANS YOU'VE RED THA BOOKS AND R SICK OF THEM AND WANT WHAT MAKES SENSE THE WAY YOUR ARMS MAKE SENSE IN SUNLIGHT

INSTEAD OF THE SENSE OF WHAT SOMEBODY ELSE HAS TOLD THEM AND THEY HAVE TOLD SOMEBODY ELSE AND WHICH SOMEBODY ELSE HAS TOLD YOU.

IT'S ALL CLOGGED, AND SOFT + SWEET STALE FAKE

ROW, MAMA, ROW.

PAGE 4-1.

AND THAT IS WHAT A UNIVERSITY IS —
NOT FORWARD, BUT
BACKWARD!!

AND, REALLY, ED, YOU'VE GOT TO ADMIT —
THAT IN PLACES THAT PRETEND TO BE
LEARNING
THEY HAVE GOT THE COW
SUCKING ITS OWN TITS
AND GETTING
POISON.
I KNOW THAT THEY
SAY IT IS EASY TO
MASK AND HACK
THE OBVIOUS,
BUT SHIT, BABY, THEY DON'T EVEN
DO THE EASY — THEY DO THE
HARD: WHICH IS DYING DURING LIFE
BECAUSE THEY ARE
AFRAID THEY
WON'T GET
BACON + EGGS
FOR BREAKFAST,
THAT IS THEIR CENTRAL
WORRY, REALLY, AND NOT
PUTTING OUT A MAGAZINE.

BLACK BEASTS, INSIDE OUT.

PAGE 5 —

DOLLAR ENCLOSED.

IF YOU STILL HAVE A COPY OF THE CONTROVERSIAL VI iiii ISSUE — PLEASE SEND

TO —

CHARLES BUKOWSKI
5126 ¼ DE LONGPRE AVE
LOS ANGELES 27, CALIF.

AND IF YOU FEEL BADLY ABOUT LOSING YOUR JOB PLEASE REMEMBER

WHAT HAPPENED TO

EZRA P.

WHO TWEAKED A FEW NOSES —
AND IT DOESN'T MATTER —
RIGHT OR LEFT —
I AM MORE FOR THE PERSONALITY + THE ENERGY + THE ART THAN I AM FOR THE "CAUSE"!

THE WOMAN IS BACK WITH THE CIGARS. I CAN STOP WRITING A WHILE.

(DON'T QUIT, BABY!)

BUK

HAIL THE FITING FOR WISHING DESIRES.

Mexico DF, sept 4, 1964

Eco Contemporáneo
Miguel Grinberg
C.C. Central 1933
Buenos Aires - Argentina

COYOTE'S JOURNAL
Dear gang:

Best best best wishes! - Voices all around, spreading a message of hope... ha ha ha, do you understand why the messengers of defeat and destruction are howling? THEY ARE AFRAID... But anyway, their cause is lost from the very beginning, they can stop magazines, sometimes they can stop men, but the cannot stop ideas. And a large hymn of love runs across the continents, magazines, poems, the elements of truth so feared by the agents of falsehood and murder. We are going to have peace, anyway. Even this darkness is a symbol, it's the end of the storm, I do not know how far we are from the exit, but along this tunnel there are many like us, walking and singing the same song to freedom.

You are one more voice of the chorus. And it's important to remain at this side of reality. We are for life, those who are for death will be opposed always to our task. Perhaps they will realize someday that it is better to be than to hide, better to love than to hate.

The Northwest Review was something great, incredible. When suddenly it stopped arriving to the bookstores, I imagined that something was going wrong. While the magazine wasm full of medrurity, there was not trouble, but when those two issues came out, oh heavens... the machinery of Obscurantism moved immediatly its shadows. The name is not important, what really matters is the flame each one of us must keep alive. Enlightment is for the children of God, not for his executioners. God is not guilty of what Hitler did in His name, His name is a symbol of creation, not a slogan to justify destruction, war and assasination. Keep spreading the seeds, no one can stop them to grow, no one can stop the rain or the sun. We are on the Earth with open hearts for the re-establishment of justice. The rest is to sow. — Joy and tulips

Miguel Grinberg

Letter of sympathy and congratulation from Miguel Grinberg, Argentinian poet, sent in September, 1964.

JONATHAN WILLIAMS, PUBLISHER
HIGHLANDS, NORTH CAROLINA

February 5, 1964

Dear Mr Van Aelstyn,

A copy of Northwest Review (Vol. 6 No. 4, Fall 1963) just came here-- I don't know whether from you or someone on the staff, or possibly from Jess Collins. It doesn't really matter. I just would like to tell you I think it is the best issue of a magazine I have seen in years. Handsomely presented, comprehensively edited, and steady from the first page to the last. I was beginning to think it was never going to happen again. I had a very modest hand in on Black Mountain Review and have followed Origin very closely. For my own purposes they have been the two most useful magazines since the War. Perhaps your issue of Northwest Review is not quite so 'new' as either of those at best-- still, it has a range of responsibility that neither Creeley nor Corman could, or can, command. My firmest congratulations to you and the others involved. I can't offer you much money-- lest a justifiably irate printer attack me with a club-- but, here is a little, and I'll mention it to some others who should subscribe.

I've enclosed a few recent newsletters, ploys, etc., to let you know what is happening with Jargon. Not a hell of a lot, but I have no less determination than ever, so, things will get done. And in return for your kindness in sending NWR, a copy of my little LTGD. I share a lot of Phil Whalen's sympathies and enthusiasms. I wish I could hike all the friendly mountains in the world, botanize, and think only of Blake and Samuel Palmer. Unhappily, there are about 100,000,000 Americans working busily to destroy any chance of doing much of that. Next week I'm driving over to St. Benedict, La., to interview two monks engaged in fighting Leander Perez. And then it's to Tougaloo College, Miss., to get the student reaction to the Beckwith trial. And, if I come up with anything useful, perhaps I'll submit it for consideration. I am aiming for the New York Times Magazine, but I never am able to control my temper enough to fit their docile requirements.

If you've anybody there capable of tackling a review of Bucky Fuller's Untitled Epic Poem on the History of Industrialization, I'd be glad to send on a [redacted] copy. Of 175 copies sent out the past year only one critic in America has thought and put anything on paper worth looking at-- Peter Yates, in the August and December issues of Arts & Architecture. Which is another one of those statistics that makes me fear for this country.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Williams

Part of Jonathan Williams' correspondence with Ed Van Aelstyn, sent as a reaction to the *Northwest Review* crisis.

KEVIN POWER

A Conversation with Robert Duncan about Poetry and Painting

Interview at Robert Duncan's home in San Francisco, 1976.

KEVIN POWER: You said at the beginning of the *H.D. Book* that the great art of our time is the collage to bring all things into complexity of meaning. That seems to me one of the essential parallels between your work and Jess's, i.e. the way you've both applied the collage technique. Do you accept that?

ROBERT DUNCAN: Yes, new complexities and also to range widely. For example, [in this canvas by Jess], you've got a Chinese demonstration of a Pythagorean theorem. However, the Chinese demonstration of that theorem surely precedes the Pythagorean theorem by some 500 years, and more than that the Chinese way of looking at it is entirely different. It's an unfolding box and, if you remember, the Greek one demonstrates by their forms moving out from the triangle, whereas the Chinese sees it as an infolding of triangles. Yet exactly the same thing is being observed. This panel is going into a room of a wealthy Roman, who's building a house the way the Romans always did in Pompeii and so forth. We take it that these are architectural units because he said exactly what size these panels were to be, but nothing about what they're to be. You can see a similar complexity of meaning in this panel where Jess is researching the Quetzalcoatl legend, and yet the cross is Western. Range and complexity of meaning are real propositions of this household. We'll spend three hours of a morning re-researching along some myth line for, say the big Narcissus canvas. I'll read all the stuff that's in French and a lot of the English. Jess can crawl his way through the German. I've gone through Greek passages with a dictionary. All of them to uncork the lore that goes into a painting of his, and lore is details. Joyce is right about it. It's the artist who gets his complete focus and indwelling sense. The word "indwelling" is the important one here. It's the "indwelling" that immediately was recognized in Still. I don't worry about what myth is there—I mean, cats are the same as myth. A lot of people think you shouldn't have myth, they think you should be out of doors playing baseball or climbing mountains or [taking]

some real part. Well, it's all real to me; it's just where you indwell, what calls you and what gets you completely into the thing you're working on. In our case it happens to be intricacy, something that promises intricacy in layers that may demand working over long periods of time. When I was in London 2 or 3 years ago, Jess wrote me about a canvas he was working on. He said he guessed he'd have to stay with the thing longer and longer before he could ever realize it. I wrote back [that I was glad]. It's the essence of what I've been trying to find in my life. I need a framework in which everything would exist. I'm interested very much now in design elements. Jess's collages are, of course, very different from some of the collages we love. They're different from Herms in that they get more and more intricate. Herms and Berman have a nature cult magic that's got lots and lots of lore in back of it, but it's not multiphasic. Herms was very attracted to the Sabian astrological moon-cycles, their ritual and cult. Berman, in much the same way, has an interest in cabbalistic letters, itself a kind of magic. Riddling is much more where we are.

KP: You also say that Jess's work moved towards being a ground for what you call Romance, for the life of the spirit that involves fairies and Christs, saints and the present. Does collage become, here, a technique for fusing the imagination with the present?

RD: Well, Jess reads more in the fairy-tale realm than I do, but it's something that cuts both ways. Both Jess and I built up for ourselves the sense of romance—it's common territory. Part of the key to that sense of romance is that our own relationship wasn't conceived of as real but as story living in a way. For Americans "real" means the psycho-drama. And I'd really been starved for someone who would recognize that the truest thing about life was the romance of it. It's romantic in almost all its aspects. This includes such things as Vietnam as far as I'm concerned, since in any romance you'd want to find out how evil things were going on. Vietnam says, clearly enough, that that's the way it really is. More and more people are beginning to see the way it really is.

KP: In Assemblage the realness of the imagination is proved both "against" and "with" the realness of the objects used.

RD: Right, you recognize they came from a junk yard while you're looking at them. As a matter of fact you get more out of these collages by Jess when you've seen *Life Magazine* all through certain years and you recognize the issue of *Life* that the picture came from. You see, then, what's been done to it and with it. It could be called trivially related because it's transformed. Its presence is enhanced by recognition. The naughtiest he

ever did was cut up a Corbett drawing and use it. He said that was exactly what he needed.

KP: What was his interest in comics?

RD: Tricky Cad is a diversion of Jess's almost all on his own. One thing that happened with Tricky Cad is that, when Wieners wanted to publish it in *Measure* in 1955, Jess wrote to Chester Gould to get permission. He received a very unpleasant letter in reply, totally outraged by the idea. Jess said that he guessed Gould had seen that the evil and lunacy of his world had been exposed. Of course, this was part of what Jess was doing. Some months, in 56 or 57, Jess did some more case histories, and about that time Brakhage arrived with a ton of material. Brakhage had collected Dick Tracy but Jess never did anything with them. He doesn't read comics at all; it just happened that in a spell he picked them up and started working with them.

KP: You also mention Dick Tracy in *Structure of Rime XXVII*. Were Jess's series of canvases called "Salvages" concerned with this idea of "rescuing"?

RD: I don't remember now whether "Salvages" were rescuing non-poems, or simply proposing they were the rescuings of something. It was like a floating idea of salvaging things. And Jess's "Salvages" were canvases which had been left in the studio when he started on something else. They were, later, picked up again and radically used. I mean by that, instead of assuming that you were going to finish them, you used them as material for entirely new paintings.

KP: In the *Book of Resemblances* there's a small group of poems where you're specifically concerned with the patina of things, with their past life.

RD: Oh yes but this was, of course, very early on. It still interests me although I haven't returned to it. What particularly struck me there was that what you took to be a debris on a table turns out to have its own order. As you straighten it out, you'd find that you'd actually been in it all the time in putting the things there. You can't make an assumption that when you put this in the so-called disorder you're engaged in some kind of haphazard process. Everything is dropped or otherwise into it or onto it and if you took a time span it would look exactly as though you were composing an object. So, what we call a litter is, in an entirely different sense, a work. Only we haven't been consciously engaged in it, we don't congratulate ourselves and we haven't had the experience of the struggle of our putting something here. And remember that the poem was advancing along the

lines where we wanted to be paying attention to what was happening as we did it and not to be deliberately placing something in the poem that would solve some problem of composing it. In the poem we're moving away from, and certainly in the canvas Jess was moving away from, the point at which we're concerned with the composition of the canvas. We talked all the time, with great scorn, about the propositions that were in Art School, in English courses, about how a thing was composed. It seemed to us that it was composed no matter what, and the main thing was how did you break up this tendency of constantly trying to move a thing to be conclusive. *Passages* and *Structures of Rime*, by the way, are not long poems; they simply have no boundaries. The first poet to realize that he had no boundaries was Williams in *Paterson*, the most bounded of poems in all of its propositions. When Williams dutifully arrives at "the end" and leaps from the Falls, he finds that it wasn't the end of the poem. Williams's intuitions were the major things we had to draw on—he went on and on. It isn't endless, like Brancusi's proposition about the form of an imaginary endless tower, but in terms of the poem it was central to us. Pound, of course, died in great distress because he felt that he'd botched the *Cantos*, that the *Cantos* didn't have a closure. He wrote the *Coda*. I put codas on things much the same way. My way of arriving at open form is finally the key I took from Williams, although Olson's language about projective verse and so forth had always been there for a long time. It's the gestalt proposition about what's happening; you look at a canvas and it's lifted right off "The place of value in the World of Facts" lectures which went on at Harvard in the years when Charles was there, the late 30s.

KP: So Open form itself can be seen as a kind of collage?

RD: Open form is really a field, and in field-composition you're not going from point A to point B. The reader could actually move through it in any way. If you think about a field, where you're going to enter it, or where you're going to leave it, or if you're going to leave it, or what you're going to do with it, are all your own business. The previous idea of form as laid down by Aristotle is, "I, the artist, build a path across this field called life, and the path goes from A to B." What this defeated was that you failed to notice what was going on. All you've got are two important points, A and B, and a limited amount of experience. In the early 50s, to get this across to students I'd say, you can go to New York from San Francisco direct, or with a sense of adventure you could introduce a few digressions, as they used to call them in the 18th century; you could go via Charleston or the Grand Canyon, but none of this would be the same as wandering across and finding a continent.

KP: It's the discontinuous elements that again assume major importance?

RD: Right. None of this was programmatic; all the ideas were present and wondering in my mind. They're still like that. All present propositions about open form are just so confused. Recently, in Cody's they started listing long poems, both Rosenthal and John gave their lists, but all without any background of what do you mean by closure or what do you mean by opening. Charles had some feelings about opening and closure, on the other hand, that can be located. One of his first poems ends with the statement that he didn't like a closed parenthesis because, when you close a parenthesis, it's the end of the man: Charles Olson born 1910, died X. Closure. And that's exactly what was on his mind about closure. My point is that you're not there at the point of birth, unless you've recently gone right through and had your engrams and know right back to conception. I come in a blur, so I couldn't find a parenthesis preceding me and when I'm going out I hardly have that one located, so that's open as far as I'm concerned.

KP: Open form comes close then to the Abstract Expressionist idea that you finish when it stops, i.e. there's a point where the process itself takes over.

RD: Right. I actually got to see Jackson Pollock painting one of those great canvases. It must have been in the 50s. Marjory parked me at Lionel Abel's house and he went and talked to Jackson Pollock all night, telling Pollock what I was doing while Pollock didn't pay any attention. What struck me again and again was that Jackson Pollock was in the middle of the painting, literally in the middle—not in front of it or in back of it, in the middle of it—and that's the way I feel in a poem too.

KP: Something you say in *Pages from a Notebook* seems like a parallel to Pollock's idea of being "in" the action of the painting. You say that "you seek in one way or another to live in the swarm of human speech." Similarly you accept "the accidents and imperfections of speech" because as you say "they awake intimations of human being," and this attitude also seems to parallel the Abstract Expressionist's acceptance of accident as a factor in the creation of the canvas. Are such analogies fair?

RD: They're tricky but all these ideas were certainly in the air. But I really would place that sense of living in the swarm of human speech, in the middle, with Pollock. McClure *really* felt he was doing what Jackson Pollock was doing. I'm not quite sure what he felt that was, because he would have his own picture of it. There was, of course, Jackson Pollock,

the Wolf. By the way there are some spendid surrealist canvases of Pollock when he breaks through from the psycho-analytic inside expressionism and when he's still got some of these first image things that were really amazing. Anyway, I don't hear in McClure what I hear in me, but obviously we're two different poets.

KP: McClure said that he was particularly attracted to the idea of a spiritual autobiography in Pollock.

RD: Well, you know that's also an area in which Jess and I were immediately influential, and this holds for McClure and for people whose art we never really got close to, like Brackhage, since along with the Romance things we had a definite sense about spirit art. It's part of the reason why I tend to dismiss the psychological—Americans are immersed in the psychological. There can be a war between the spirit and the psyche, but there shouldn't be at all; in fact they really should be together. Americans are decently shy of spirit, and that's okay. We're rightly embarrassed with the claim to spirituality, and yet the world is absolutely a spiritual existence. And one of the great assurances that it has happened in America are those great canvases of Jackson Pollock where you see the interior light. It's not perhaps the first time, since there is some spirituality in 19th-century light, but the painters were often thinking of it as outside light whereas for Pollock it's inside light. Where inside there had been muck and shit, suddenly there's an interior light. It's not Jungian, it's not painted with a mandala or something, it's not Buddhist—it's a real interior light. In fact you see it in the canvases because he works in it. He's again in the middle of the light. He painted in the middle of the light. He painted at night, all night long in the middle of a light that couldn't possibly be anywhere else. Oh, of course, he's got all those non-light lights, the blues etc., but the paintings aren't defeated because they went to the museums. Jess is defeated because he insists on painting by daylight. But Jackson Pollock's not defeated because he painted by the very light in which the paintings were going to be shown. I believe he painted in those big canvases until the radiance was present. So period, it's a spiritual presence and that's what I mean by indwelling, the presence. And what I mean by saying he isn't intelligent is that he's destroyed by the very place where he is like Dylan Thomas was. He'd returned to this ecstatic painting in the light until the presence was there but nowhere could he entertain the intellectual frameworks that belong to such a light in painting.

KP: Is that close to what you're saying in the *Black Mt. Review*, where you see form as "a spirit in itself," as constantly manifesting itself or aspects of itself?

RD: Right. Well, the Dewey-Elie Faure world that I was eating in High School is the source of that. It's not an original idea but it's part of what shows how thoroughly conventional to my earliest sources of a direction my mind would be all the time. The proposition of the litter on the table says that no matter what we do, we are always in it, and maybe our art trains us to have some sense of how much we're in it. Wouldn't you say that the mad drivings and so forth that were going on were also present in that light of Jackson Pollock? In one of those same huge canvases called *Lavender Light* or something, Chicago also has a great canvas of this period; well, in those canvases you know that, while you're looking at them and seeing the inner light, they're also built up of all that mad drunken impulse. So we substantially go back to a life that could be called unconscious although its devotion to the light is absolute in the painting. We all know that Pollock was like a stumble-box. Reznik on the other hand is almost propositional, as for example in the later ones where he's trying to paint a canvas in which nothing happens in any particular area. I've a little tiny canvas that he gave me some years ago. I try to keep to a rule to have no canvases that we don't buy. To start saying yes to a canvas is death on wheels—you've got to want them to know why. But anyway, we did want this one. What Reznik was turning to was still not abstract—gee I wish constructivists didn't mean Max Bill, but constructing something. What he was constructing was an event that he felt. Certainly he is a transcendentalist. He was constructing hugh canvases that would be pointless except that nothing was to emerge at any level to the eye as possibly being focal points. They were all equal throughout the whole canvas. And you began to realize what it was: his entire tension was almost like got out of his head so that nothing violent would happen on the entire canvas. It wouldn't even shiver. It was really strange, although again this light was present.

KP: You also see this inner light in Rothko.

RD: Well, Rothko's penetrating depth of colour is something like this.

KP: But there was that move into the blacks and greys at the end of his life, in canvases which, in retrospect, seem autobiographical in their sense of retreat inwards.

RD: But I think these were also social feelings.

KP: I somehow felt he moved from the passionate assertion of the earlier canvases to a meditative space that also became a suicidal area of darkness.

It's perhaps a result of the Paris Retrospective where the chronological presentations of his work did mean this move from the reds and yellows to the greys and blacks.

RD: He may have been addressing death but he couldn't have done so any more strongly than he did when he worked in violet. Violet is much more the colour of death. Corbett had the worst and slowest form of suicide by alcohol and at the time of his death he goes into the depths of white and black. In Pollock colour becomes an element of drawing, whereas colour before had been purely a means of getting the experience with the light. In other words I think there were dialectics at the point where he ran into the tree; he was making a proposition that would have thrown him forward.

KP: The reappearance of the figure . . .

RD: Right, he's also going back to classical French Art like Picasso or something.

KP: It was an astonishing experience to see those last works of Picasso at Avignon where he filled the walls of the Palais des Papes with what amounted to a reliving of his whole artistic life, as if he wanted to feel them for the last time and put them together. Your own *Dante Etudes* seem also to amount to a resume of your poetics.

RD: The *Dante* piece was the last thing I've finished. The *17th Century Suite* was written before that, although parts of the *Dante* in fact preceded it. They overlap. I work in interrupted forms. I've got several poems going, including one by no means finished called *Towards the Sonnet*. In it I've done versions of Shakespeare sonnets and so forth. So it's a form I'm working in different directions. And of course Jess was copying. In a way he'd initiated this business of copying from black and white pictures—it could be a photograph, or a drawing, or a transcription of a photograph etc. Rule No. 1 is that nowhere, except in his imagination, does it have colour. Rule No. 2 is that it makes propositions of line which he transforms into mass, into area. He's faithfully transcribing—so faithfully, for instance, that a Burne-Jones scholar who was at Barbara Joseph's, who has the copy in her collection, exclaimed when he was looking at the painting which is a copy of a page of a Burne-Jones letter, "That's Burne-Jones." Of course he was undone since nothing of Burne-Jones could ever be that painting, but he recognized the hand-writing.

KP: The Pre-Raphaelites always seem to have held a fascination for Jess since in the *Book of Resemblances* they're clearly central to the designs and shapes that are taken up.

RD: Yes, right. The Pre-Raphaelites in terms of English literature are bohemians, not academics. So that the academics really have a very hard time with them. They can't forget them lolling around, smoking opium, generally misbehaving, and so forth.

KP: And of course your interest in the Hermetic tradition is again underlined here.

RD: Well, my parents were hermeticists of course. What I'm doing there is in a way addressing and trying to make intelligible to myself all the things that were fascinating to me about it when I was a child. It was fascinating to be in a household with Hermeticism; it was also a pain in the arse, like religion can be, because, for instance, I still can't tolerate using astrological lore. Why? because it was law one: I was adopted by astrology, if I wanted to do something it was done by astrology. Lore and Romance I did learn from the household and also my father's attachment to Pre-Raphaelite ideas. There's a lot of junk in the Pre-Raphaelites, but the fascination is finding out what's real. When you go to them today you're rescuing from the scrap heap. The trouble with Matisse is that there's no scrap heap onto which Matisse has gone, so you've only got Grand Art. As a matter of fact you can almost rescue Renaissance Art today because it's really on the scrap heap. Picasso is more questionable; some parts are on the scrap heap.

KP: One way the Pre-Raphaelite influence has filtered through has been in book illustration.

RD: Yes, and the fact that the illustrational had been forbidden in painting interests me. Both Jess and myself are attracted to bringing into High Art what had been forbidden to it by the 18th century. There was a division between painting and illustration, a war between colour and line that Blake carries on about. There was a general feeling that painting should not illustrate and that's where the Pre-Raphaelites get read out because their painting was illustrating. Now we've never been as idiotic as to pick up a war with the Impressionists but, if you know Pisarro's letters to his son Lucien, you'll see that Lucien was an illustrator in the last great generation of illustrators. We still look at illustration all the time, clear through to the Art Nouveau period. Again it's to bring the forbidden in; in this case it's not only on the scrap heap it has been disowned. Our homosexuality also meant rescuing the irregular. It's exactly analogous to admitting that you're

fascinated by Hermeticism. Also you read the funnies and build a world of such and you build the world as a world of spirit. I really hate something like Camp, or even style. I finally realized that I haven't got any aesthetic. What I've actually got is a collection of sentiments. Even that Brancusi over there is a sentiment; mind you Brancusi would faint at the idea, but it's so pure a sentiment that I can take a copy of it.

KP: What did you think of Jess's inclusion in the Pop Show in London?

RD: Oh that was an accident. I wasn't against it. Pop Art fascinated us but it became disappointing. I think that was due to its lack of spiritual imagination because painting-wise artists such as Rosenquist and Lichtenstein had amazing ability. It was intriguing painting but it seemed to lack visual imagination and what that all implies. So spiritually he ended up merely adding agenda to the sado-masochistic scene. What's so attractive, for instance, in Lichtenstein is his magnificently elegant line. In other words, there are scenes as incidental to the actual spirit of the painting as the seltzer bottles in Leger, and Leger is sort of poppa to Lichtenstein. I don't mind the seltzer bottles in Leger but I really can't get a boot in the face as part of my icon.They were making icons for our church, icons in which they express their anger that the icons are so trivial. I've just received this book of Kenneth Anger; his life as an artist is crumbling and going to pieces, because of his real spiritual disarray. Choosing Satan goes nowhere. As Jess said at one point, America has so despised spirit that people will hug the little imp to their hearts just because it's a spirit. Luther is from an ink bottle. The world of spirit is everything—Rilke really starts talking about it. The Americans, and the Europeans as well, have gone in for this no spirit stuff and then they just get a hunger for a spiritual thrill.

KP: I saw Anger presenting his films at Berkeley and it was sad to see him reduced to an imitation of show-biz personality. Could I ask you now about Jess's paste-ups, itself a method to permit an inclusive open field?

RD: Jess pins up his paste-ups until they are all done so that he can still move them around, and then the pasting is very complicated. He sometimes has to paste in the most complicated layers and figures. Only in the very early ones does he paste-up right off. This one, for example, by the time it's ready to paste consists of hundreds and hundreds of things. In the original he mixes materials and periods.

KP: I was looking at some early ones in *Oh*.

RD: Yes, that's almost the beginning, Jess's first collages I saw when I first met him. We had lunch at Brockway's and then went over to see a show of Jess's. I bought a little painting which is in the other room. He had some collages there, one of which was a large figure made up of male nudes—very simplistic but built up of all these figures.

KP: The composition techniques of *Passages* also seem analogous to the paste-ups?

RD: Yes, that's true but by that time Jess has gone a lot further. What's parallel to these earlier ones are the poems written in *Letters*. They were written during the years that I was first living with Jess, and also, of course, some of the things in the book *Writing Writing* are very parallel. By the time I'm writing *Passages*—and I was already wondering why something wasn't happening in the poetry field like that—anyway by that time *Structures of Rime* had already begun with no closures and with no boundaries, and a field which extends beyond itself so it itself is not a field adequate to the composition where both can move from prose to verse, but one where the verse line would be the dominant mode. Prose is that block of paragraph that moves and feels differently, and verse is written in lines and can be articulated.

KP: Yet there are those prose poems in *Caesar's Gate*.

RD: Sure, and there are prose poems as early as the book *Letters*. The prose poems in *Caesar's Gate* were done in 1955-56 just before *Letters* was published.

KP: These paste-ups also seem evocative of dream states. I wonder if they have anything to do with what you meant by "night language" (*Pages from a Notebook, Black Mt. Review*). Were McDonald and Helen Adam in there?

RD: I'd read McDonald when I was little, I think Jess had only read one of them. We read them together when we were first living together—we read aloud. There are 50-60 McDonald novels. And Helen Adam was certainly right in there. We didn't meet her until 1954, that must have been right in the thick of the McDonald period. Night language has a little bit of Freud in it. It's not so much the language of dream but something a little like what people mean by background noise. I don't really think it was the language of Lilith. It's more overhearing things and if you're going to sleep it's not the language in the dream but the way you listen to voices or sounds of animals and so forth.

KP: So it's again the concept of the poet as the articulator of what you've called the "shell of murmuring"?

RD: Right. For one thing I think poetry may rise—well, I haven't got an exact location for it but I have the notion that poets had as their practice, when they used to be a profession, to hear what birds are saying. We know all this from legend. I think quite literally they had to go and hear what the surf was saying, what children were murmuring in the garden. In Eliot it's children murmuring in the garden outside that's very strong. For me, it's my own memories of surf or something. So night language means to me the sounds I would listen to. And in the tradition of my family, since they had seances, there was a strong love of reading things out loud and of hearing what so and so's saying. I used to puzzle as a child because it wouldn't always be words or sometimes you thought you heard words.

KP: So now as you're composing when you say the words there's a series of voices present?

RD: Yes, language speaks to me when I write and not the other way round. Well, once in a while I can be found ranting at the language. But the point that makes me want to get to the poem is that the language starts talking to me. And the paint talks to Jess, he's adamant about that. That explains a lot of this business about translating: since the picture's there, he doesn't interfere with the picture. It's the picture and the paint that start talking to him. He has to be in the painting quite a time before it happens. He's working on one now where he had to go through a long slaying job before the converstion started.

KP: This is an inner language which belongs to the work he's looking at?

RD: Right, it belongs to the work, not to the language per se. It's the same for me with the poem. The quality it has of being the poem it is, is that it, the poem, starts talking. The way that I know that I'm in a *Structure of Rime* or *Passages* is just that you know, like with a person, it's absolutely definite. I've no doubt that it's *Passages* talking and so on. I used to put numbers on them but then I started to wonder how come I put numbers since it isn't really a progression. It's a progression up until about 36, the last numbered one, but after that I don't worry if it has a number or something.

KP: Does that explain why *Structure of Rime* can become *Passages* because you're hearing both voices as it were?

RD: Sure, the part of any form can be in any other form, that's very definite. My reaction to reading *Leaves of Grass* which Whitman kept reforming by moving parts around, parts of one poem to another poem, was that I thought he knew much more about poetry than many 20th–century poets do. It seemed to me shown again with the exceptional knowledge he had of nature-form. Of course, that would in fact be a principle of collage. And that reminds me of something that happened to Jess. One of his things came back broken from a show. He collected all the insurance from it which amounted to the price of the object. He then built another object with it.

KP: Sounds like something from Duchamp! Your interest in Whitehead also seems related to this concept of a work made up of interchangeable parts. You quote Whitehead's idea of the personal identity of man as "a matrix for all the transitions of life," one that "is changed and variously figured by the things that enter it." This seems to me to be the thrust behind the notion of "open field" and suggests that open field is perhaps one of the conditions truest to that of man himself.

RD: Yes, that's true. Another thing that is valuable to me from Whitehead and still is, I'm talking of course of *Process and Reality*, is that he treats us not as entities but as events. One of the puzzles of my family and their hermeticism is that they propose you're an entity—I'm an entity, cat's an entity; I still feel that in the fifties we were concerned with identity, just the thing that Stein was saying. It was Charles who got me turned on to *Process and Reality*. He came preaching it in 1956 and I started reading it, seeing immediately that my book was his book and so forth, although there couldn't be two more different readings. Whitehead made a tremendous impression because it seemed to me to make everything intelligible; because we were watching what was happening in the poem, or happening in what we were doing, we were ourselves events of the universe. It explained how come our attentions are what they are, how come we're more real out there etc. And it is my experience that I'm more real out here, bouncing off you, and consequently in a radar I'm here but what would I do otherwise. With *Opening of the Field* you can tell where Whitehead comes in; he comes in right away and from there on he's going to be there. Of course I'd already proposed "the field" and it was a complex sort of joke along with Charles's proposition of the field. And also in a Joyceian manner I was proceeding to orchestrate it, using every possible extension of lore or field and of various structures, and even to build the book like a Roman field with the dead going to be in a certain place and so forth. And then we were also living at Stinson, so there were open fields for me to go walking in. In fact everything that I could do around that word. Then when Charles came with

the Whitehead it just opened that up until it was not simply a joke, it was "nature."

KP: You also saw the field as a metaphor for eternity, "open to the tracking of any possibility," I think you said.

RD: It's certainly a metaphor for eternity. We talk about *the* field but the interesting thing about field as it's proposed is that usually a field will be changing, a series of fields exists. In other words if we take any event it has a series of fields. Our entire field of eternity is one of those fields, not *the* field of the fields. And also because Dante with his civilisation of civilisations is so very heavy on mind, the idea of the field of fields is always there. Whitehead has something that blasts this almost along some Hindu line in one of the footnotes to *Process and Reality* where he's talking about the ethical concept of God and he says that God doesn't seek goodness, he seeks higher intensities. It's an explosion, like in the Ambar. Then the footnote says, this of course refers to our present atomic universe. Well only in the grand Schopenhauer return to the Hindu, in which you've got the universe of universes, can you have a present atomic universe. Actually I have an unsettled feeling about the universe and that's okay. That's why you don't finish your work. I'm not going to write the Divine Comedy and say, "Hi buddy, there's the universe." Whitehead didn't have an unsettled feeling and so wrote *Process and Reality*. I'm happily unsettled so Art must have moved some place else. Though you know, to go back to our friend Matisse, he seems to have been joyously unsettled. There's a lovely passage that shows him in great command, his description of what he was doing at Vence when the nuns wanted him to do the Chapel. . .and so it's a book and it's also a room; I think it's a perfect idea. And now we're back to what most appeals to me about the proposition of field; i.e., that it is an eventful series of architectures, it has no closure.

KP: Does it permit a momentary realization?

RD: Yes sometimes. But the interesting thing is not that the realization could be momentary but that it's immediate, it's right there where you are working. Then what makes that analogy with eternity relevant is that right there where you are working, you are working in the presence of the poem, and it is in turn absolutely true to, and productive within yourself of, the realization of what the poetry it belongs to is. When I'm working on a poem in the concept of an oeuvre, like Cocteau, or classically Flaubert, or Joyce, that is not the world of a field. Joyce, for example, when he's working on *Finnegans Wake* understands it as a sequel to *Ulysses* and understands it in the design of the five works. Yet when I'm working on

the *Dante Etudes* they entirely change the apprehension of what the poetry they belong to is, but not because they add to everything that was there before. As a matter of fact my experience of rereading or reworking *Caesar's Gate* for the third time entirely reinformed what it was. Yet I'm working with something from 1949 supposedly. So my idea of sequences is not like the serial poem as Spicer proposes it, or as Blaser proposes it. My argument against is that our experience at any point is changing. Not just our judgement. Simply, if I'm to look at you, I'm immediately aware of you in a field which happens to be the one present. All right let's say we're going to deal with something in which we would fit you and in which you'd be related to an experience I'd had call to before but immediately we would move to another field, not before or after, because it still has only *here* for me. The other thing I begin to have like an antimacassar, quoting it over and over again, is that the Saints only have one place to meet and that's here where we're speaking. What interests me is, what is it that arouses us to this immediacy. And immediacy means there's no medium going towards something else outside to where we are. Yet the poetry's present, the poem is not just a thing in itself. It again is written in the presence of a poetry. It again potentially reinforms all other acts of poetry and they don't have to be redundant at all because reinformed we look at them and there they are doing something else.

KP: Is that the actual continuous mystery of the sounding, that the resounding can never be the same?

RD: Oh yes, and the resonance because sounding is not just the sound you're making but the resonance in relation to all the other sounds present, and the sense of this sound now being present in the aura of the sound where we are. All other sounds have changed for us, because they become resonant with it. And consequently there are new propositions of chord and discord and other huge senses of concordance. Fascinating to me is the scholar's pursuit of the concordance, where the work is supposedly through and then you make a concordance of all the elements. Well, a concordance is a strange thing to read as such, not tracing it back to the poem.

KP: I saw one of Taylor's works that threw up the fact that he had this pattern of off-rhymes . . .

RD: Mine's based on vowel leadings and internal rimes.

KP: You're now teaching a course on vowels. How do you set about that?

RD: It was a terrible failure. I had a great time and they got to hear that there was a vowel around. It was my first venture in teaching poetry but I think I'll beat my tracks back to the History of Ideas.

KP: What was it that you did then?

RD: The phone company had a marvellous chart of phones that I used to give them a scale. My concept about vowels and consonants being elementary for the poem could be approached, I thought, by letting them see the scale they're working with. Ideas are scales. If they're anything else then the kid thinks he's writing about something. When you're asking a question I'll take one of those ideas and build around it, but that's not what school teachers are usually doing. They want, for example, to make certain statements about love in a poem but they're so anxious and they don't realise that there are eight hundred million statements about love to be made that if you made a huge structure they could all be there.

KP: So the inherent music if heeded will carry a diversity of meanings?

RD: The artist's responsibility is to have studied, known, and be able to hear resonances. Take a poem by Poe—its resonances are specific to poems by Shakespeare or Dante, etc. You can make comparisons and so forth but what actually happens is that Poe seems different. Now that's already a resonance, that's already rime. To be different or to be like something are already for me too close associations. You see there are no boundaries between poetry and painting, or poetry and music, so a question about Brueghel will bring up a question about how that looks in Brahms.

KP: How do you set about listening to, or working with, the vowels?

RD: You've got to hear them while they're there and since English disguises its vowels and we traditionally try to think we've got fewer than we have it's my idea then that time should be spent hearing and tuning up so that you're immediately perceptive of what's present and what's not present. At Black Mountain I taught it as analogous to Albers's business of colour.

KP: In one of the *Passages*, you use the vowel chart, if I remember rightly. What do you think of Snyder's idea that breath is literally inspiration, the taking in of the world, and that expiration is man making contact with the world?

RD: Well, breath is the physical way in which the vowel comes into existence. I also got hold of the book he mentioned the other night when he was reading *Turtle Island, The Garland of Letters* by Woodroffe, and it was quite splendid. But in his own poem about the vowels you wouldn't have thought one was present. Gary now appears to despise this level of the poem, yet his early work is this very power. I felt that we were listening to ideas; nothing was an event that needed a poem. Gary's conscious mind has never been in tune to the poem; he's always thought that the poem was an agency of communication. But that's where his head is. It's the same with Rexroth, though of course both of them can write very beautiful passages, but they're not formalists whereas I am. Gary, since he's a Buddhist, thinks that experience is maya and that he's supposed to vote for something else. But even that doesn't really explain it. I feel that Gary thinks his real life means building a house or cooking or something and that words are not real life—they're referring to it. I don't know where they take place then if that's the case!

KP: But in his earlier poems he does show how the actual physical rhythms become the rhythms of the poem.

RD: Right, but I think he's lost that; he's become proficient, habitual.

KP: You quote *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in the *Day Book* where you say man has been endowed with three-fold life, namely, vegetable, animal and rational, and that what's most important to him are the fire of love and the direction of the will. This seems to offer the guidelines to your own *Dante Etudes*?

RD: Well, they could have been the guidelines. Yet what I found so fresh when I was working on the *Dante Etudes* was both my sense of household and my pleasure of the way I like to live in the city. These seem to come forward again and again, and imaginary possibilities of city living were moving in that poem quite frequently as figures. So Dante's own spirit would, of course, be a guideline all the time, but essentially I'm interested there with how much it has to do with the movement about streets, squares, areas in the city. There are some sections in the middle where I'm taking from Dante talking about stanza form and that translates in my mind to images of neighbourhoods and so forth. I don't drive so I'm always walking around and there are a lot of city places I recognize.

KP: It's looking towards your idea of a city/state again?

RD: Yes, that was on my mind. I thought Dante and Plato are not such difficult propositions if we realize that men imagine ways of living and we don't see them as laid down plans.

KP: The fire image is also a constant preoccupation with you?

RD: Oh I'm not the only one in the world who's got fire under them. Charles, as a matter of fact, charges me in *Against Wisdom as Such* with not having fire, he says I'm the light. Over and over he keeps trying to make me the light. Yet there are two elements of fire and in that little homage to Charles in *Structure of Rime* there's that image of the Indian heating the head of the drum on the fire. . .

KP: You make use both of the fire of inspiration where the idea is to be fired and of the fire of consumption, i.e., as both a constructive and destructive agent.

RD: Yes. Fired means firing of clay. One of my earliest poems, *The Years as Catches*, is filled with images that have been tested, like metal is tested. I see ordeal not as proving yourself but as being "fired." One of the senses I had of Vietnam was that as they were being bombed they were being enormously fired. So that all the people who survived are a million times more powerful than those who died in the bombings. But I also understand of course the sense of being shattered. Students in the Square of Mexico City were not "fired"; they were overwhelmed. But the point is that you test it, and this means of course that there's metal that fails to hold. So I don't view a test as proving what you are but as refining or strengthening, and this could go too far and break you but you're willing to go through whatever it is.

KP: Fire's also an import image in Pound, Olson, and H.D. That reminds me of something I wanted to ask you about H.D. You mention you first became aware of the *War Trilogy* in the painters' studios in San Francisco when you were working on *Medieval Scenes*. What kind of impact did H.D. make on the painters? And I also wanted to ask you if *Medieval Scenes* was influenced by the painters.

RD: I'm wondering if I ever said that. In 1942 when I was here I was very much against the 2nd World War, there was just a lonely group of us who were mostly anarchists. Anyway when I was here I looked up Rexroth and one of the things he said was that there was a terrific war poem about the horrors of the war by Edith Sitwell in a magazine called *Life and Artists Today*. So I went to the library to find that poem and in the same issue was

part of the *War Trilogy*. So I followed it through and kept up with the magazine while I was back in New York in 43 and 44. So that's how I came to know the *War Trilogy*. Now I was around painters all of this time but I'm not sure that I related the two things in any way. The poem really starts catching up with me about 47 when I'm working on *The Venice Poem*. Oh, but wait a minute, it was important to the second version of *Medieval Scenes* that I did, the one that got printed, in which I developed it thematically with the word "more" and "mere" and analogously to the way in which words are chained and sewn in the *War Trilogy*. It's also true that, even before I met Jess, I was always around painters. I was even married to one.

* * *

RD: The Germans, you know, pushed around into Upper Russia, and then they pushed down into Scythia. They come back into Germany about the 3rd century A.D. pushed by the Scythians and the Mongolians. In other words the Barbarians are north of the Roman border, and they've got their own Queen Figure. In 1950 I had as my seminar topic Germanic and Celtic Art and there was this picture of the Gunderstuve Kettle, a kettle large enough for them to mimic their cooking of a sacrifical victim in it. There's one picture where they're lowering a little man into the kettle and it has huge goddess figures all around it, the tribe's goddess. It is she who governs their wanderings. That gets identical to the Shekinah in the Jewish wanderings. When the Jewish people lost the Kingdom it was the Shekinahs who went with them, and the hearth begins then to be the camp-fire that you build anywhere. Olson has many propositions of the same thing in the *Maximus*. That's what his man on the sea is; he's in the center wherever he is and this center's always moving around. So my idea of nation would be pretty much how do we survive in our way of living, not how do "we" survive, but how does the way of living survive. All those things that seem "romantic" have lasted even though they weren't present in the dominant culture, and they've survived because we're susceptible. One thing we know is that if we've been susceptible then some other individual somewhere must have been susceptible. More than that we've got good evidence that human beings are amazingly susceptible to Romance. Otherwise the puzzle in poetry would not be that it was individually expressive but rather how come that it keeps traditional patterns. All the way through History the meanest centuries keep alive heroic attitudes.

KP: In other words the psyche keeps its own ideal state inside it, as I think you said in the *H.D. Book?*

RD: Yes, as a matter of fact the psyche makes a judgement about the actual state and can be adamant about it. Every psyche will name the state, and respect or disrespect what's going on, and some when they find it unjust are fighters. But the disaster that happens within a tyranny is that those who cannot locate the injustice in a state lose heart. People wonder about the collapse of Rome, but Rome was always a disgusting state and it lost heart in no time at all. The psyche makes demands, it reserves its judgements. The demands of Love Romance, as far as we know, are created in the periods of the troubadours. They were recultivated out of whatever in the Ancient World, but they were transformed and they became a demand for every falling in love or passionate relationship. Passionate poetry, by its very nature, its very rhythms, is how you think and how you feel when you're excited. That's what a cadence starting in something is!

KP: Love is thus the giving of form to the poem?

RD: Yes, in falling in love everything's changed, so that's very much like a poem. It's like the way in which when you're writing a poem the writer disappears or the reader disappears and the poem seems to take the place of reader or writer. So that you're completely in it, very much like any love relationship. We can't draw away from it, and when we're in it, it will judge all reality around it. Freud wanted the reality principle to judge our actions so that we shouldn't come to grief; well, compared to that, any poet wants to come to grief. Love for me is an intense part of my life, so obviously it gets into the poetry and is frequently thought of as analoguous. Yeats, for example, adds hate to it so that as far as he's concerned love and hate become the driving forces.

KP: It's a dominant part of *The Venice Poem.*

RD: Well *The Venice Poem* was conceived of as a rite of passage through a period of intense jealousy or sick love. It tries to exorcise it. It's not a very loving poem, to put it mildly, but that's why love becomes its topic because that's the sickness in it.

KP: It's also the power that formulates the propositions in it?

RD: Right. They're attempts over and over again to find a curative base so that love will not be sickened. There's a long one, for instance, in the Coda, where the prayer to Shakespeare is a prayer to equilibrium in which love can be felt again.

KP: In *The Venice Poem* you're also exploiting the Poundian notion of everything being contemporaneous

RD: Oh yes that's always fascinated me, even before I heard it. It's the power of the imagination again, the fact that when you're reading about the Middle Ages you'd be in it and it would take a lot of shaking and reminding to break the spell so that you had to go out and water the lawn! It's as simple as that.

KP: Why was that poem always so central to you?

RD: It was the decision I made in that poem to follow the poem through. I often think of it as the last magic poem I wrote, apotropaic magic. I let the poem initiate me. And there also seemed to me to be powers that one could call upon, like calling upon the power of Venus, calling upon Jealousy itself to cure itself. It's also homeopathic, isn't it! My feeling was that if I precipitated the full content of this jealousy—to that extent it's Freudian—I would also in that precipitation be changed and have a kind of cure. And at the end of the poem, of course, you're reborn. When I think about the poem my contentional relationship with the world is affirmative, and so when terrible things happen I don't experience them as punishments but as experiences. I want to find out what they're like so I affirm them deeper and deeper. So the poem had to be that long for the experience to take place. I mean was it nine months or not, for a pregnancy to be born! It's not a poem of self-discovery, it's a poem of self-experience. That's very different. The poem to compare with that one is another poem of jealousy, the *African Elegy*, where there's "I," "I," "I," going on. It has very strong accusations and releases figures of discovery about my own cruelties that, had this poem not been there, I wouldn't have arrived at, admissions into the content of the poem. In *The Venice Poem* they reappear because of those voices going back and forth about the poet and the fact he's self-centered and so forth. But they are breakthroughs for me.

KP: You put out parts of yourself in the poem which you simply let stand?

RD: Yes. What shocked people about the poem was the exposition of an unresolved and non-integrated series. For example, in the Rexrothian position, the poet presented himself as a model of classical form, and there are classical ways of being jealous such as in Catullus who dismissed the world as tawdry, but what I was doing was opposed to this.

KP: I understood three of the propositions in the poem but I wonder if you'd explain the last. You begin with the poem as a mirror for the whole

world; in the second proposition you have a part of the whole world reflected in the mirror; in the third it reflects a realistic image of what's happening. And finally in the fourth proposition you present the mirror as imitation, as poem. But you then say it "stops, changes" and what I'd like to know is what you meant by that.

RD: The germinal idea in the poem had come from Jane Harrison where she was talking about, I think it's in *Themis*, the origin of Dithyramb. As a matter of fact the whole book has this proposition of what was going on in the Dithyramb and she divides it up into dromenon and mythos. She says that dromenon is the series of things that is happening, and the mythos is the story that's told of the things that happen. But what sent me was the tearing up and shattering of the Zeus child, and then the recomposing of the Zeus child, all in order to give birth to a new entity, a new person, and that I thought the poem was doing. She said that what they did in the Dithyramb was imitate birth, and that the theme of imitation is dromenon, and this was exactly what I felt I was imitating. In other words you go through jealousy imitating something; you do not know where it's going but a new consciousness will be precipitated.

KP: It is once again the process of the poem resolving itself, and that's analogous to the Abstract Expressionist idea.

RD: Yes, it's being in the middle of the poem, it's the Pollock thing we were talking about earlier. If you think about it, the person in *The Venice Poem* is entirely in the middle. The poem precipitated its own advance. It was being read to everybody while it was going on, so it was a brutal process. It's made up of a series of incidents that would have passed except that the poem wouldn't let them pass. So it was psycho-dramatic for a whole group of people.

KP: In *Writing Writing* you talk about automatic processes and you have a poem on one of Jess's canvases where the poem parallels the way a canvas comes into being.

RD: Yes, a canvas coming into itself.

KP: You say "The red is ready before the part of it plays."

RD: We were reading Stein an awful lot in that period. *The Four Saints in Three Acts* was issued on a long-playing record, around 1949, and we played it down to the knuckle practically.

KP: Were you interested in automatic techniques in any way?

RD: No. Stein insisted hers weren't automatic. My hand wasn't automatic. Automatic means that you are not aware of the words that you are writing when you are writing them. Whereas what I was interested in was to what extent could I break associational lines and produce a certain sense. And I found that had to be by paying attention to the immediate word and by making a leap wherever I could see that it was going.

KP: Such as, for example, when instead of letting the words settle into their syntactical order you make one word react against the word that proceeds it. Yet still an overall image emerges?

RD: Yes. I didn't share the non-objective fear of imagery. I mean in Jess's canvases you might begin to see a face or something appear but, gee, Corbett would turn green if you could see a face or cloud in his work. I was not in any sense aiming at not having anything happen in the poem or in defeating the message; I'm just talking about the area in which this would occur.

KP: I know from what you said earlier that you hadn't read the Still texts but I wondered how far you'd go in agreeing with this quotation of his. Still writes: "I held it imperative to evolve an instrument of thought which would aid in cutting through all cultural opiates past and present so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision could be achieved, an idea be revealed with clarity." I thought this interest in revealing vision would have been common ground.

RD: Except that I go in for the opiates. As a matter of fact this is the area of my work, the opiate part, the fact I like getting entranced in a poem, which people who admire my work don't like. Still owes something to Whitman here, who, if you remember, was going to do away with enchantment and entrancement of the poem. It would also certainly be in line with Creeley's intentions and Olson's.

KP: But the idea of pushing through towards vision comes close to you?

RD: Oh yes. If you think about what happens in the vision of a Still, of what happens in a canvas of that grandeur, they're keeping alive a mode of being; for instance they produce grandeur that's not expensive. Its truth is absolutely striking. I mean there were, around this same time, many painters who had a whole series of motives and rhetorics, the Pop artists come to mind, and who were painting canvases that made fun of the fact

there was an art market. This is so trivial, or to put it another way, who made huge trivial canvases? This is something that's just not in that statement of Still's at all. And so I think that he certainly would represent a force that interested me, and that is, how do you keep alive value in a society that has none of that? Well, you keep it alive in painting, that's one way! Still readdresses the problem of how to survive over and over again.

KP: You mention Pop Art and you've a series of poems about ordinary objects, the bath, matches etc. where you describe them in an extremely rich language. Were these a kind of counter to Pop banality?

RD: I don't really know if I was concerned with Pop in that period. I was really addressing the household we lived in. We've also got drawings of all those various articles. Oh wait a minute, you're thinking of the bath in *Domestic Scenes* where the things themselves are very ordinary and the language very rich. These are really about relationships to people.

KP: They're too early for Pop, of course, but there is a kind of recontextualizing?

RD: It's like this bar of soap is my magic thing. Well, one thing to come out of *Medieval Scenes* was that Jack and myself finally discovered where the swans were. We started a game of trying to discover them because we saw that some of them were around us. Much of it is in the Freudian principle that things that come into dreams are actually things that were in one's daily life and are reproposed. The swans were on the decal of the bathroom wall-paper and we collected practically the whole group from what was around. So the populated poem in *Domestic Scenes* was to bring them forward and then find out that they were older things. I sometimes feel that my poetry's deficient in its relation to what Williams would call the object, the old red wheelbarrow, since so much of it is about poetry, stems so much from poetry, books, and art. And so the practice of addressing my mind to them—I now feel it's overdue although I've not sat down to do it. But, certainly in the period of *Writing Writing* it was very much a part of what I was doing.

KP: Did Williams's use of collage techniques in *Spring and All* make any impression on you?

RD: The period when I was writing these poems I would have had only a very poor sense of what Williams was doing in *Spring and All*. I just had the full superstition from the age of 17 or so when I first started reading

poetry that Williams's was a major poetry, but I really had no clue as to how that came about. It came from my following up of Pound and Joyce. So those kinds of things were just puzzles, I could feel them but I couldn't get at what was going on at all. Yet I must have had it fairly early since there's a letter of mine to Everson in 1940 when I was 21, in which I write to him saying that I had a sense that what he and I need is the secrets of Dr. Williams. So I must have had some kind of awareness and I expect you can guess how only a handful of people in the country even knew that Dr. Williams even existed.

KP: And later how did his use of collage affect you?

RD: Well in *Paterson* definitely. *Paterson* lies back of *Medieval Scenes*. It had started coming out during the war and was immediately effective. It takes a long time for it to soak in but I think *The Venice Poem* shifts and movements right the way through draw on *Paterson*. Of course, as I've said, H.D.'s *War Trilogy* was as important because the gods had come back in and that reunited my feeling with what had been fascinating to me in my parents' cults. I didn't belong to any cult but I had a way now for the gods to come in without being decorative as they'd appear in Keats.

KP: And the shifts you use in *The Venice* and *Pindar Poems*, are these parallels to the kinds of effects collage produces?

RD: Sort of. *The Pindar Poem*, like *The Venice Poem*, is composed of four sections. Its Coda builds to an anxiety, whereas the Coda in *The Venice Poem* builds to an exhilaration. Yet they've got the same parallel structures.

KP: Dance is also a central image of these poems.

RD: It's a theme in my poetry. It's part of my teens and twenties, and I also spent a fair part of my thirties dancing.

KP: There's a picture of you in Nin's *Diaries* dancing to a Varèse recording.

RD: Yes, that was around Christmas 1939, New York.

KP: Do you see the poem, like dance, to be this moment of coming together of breath, body, and movement?

RD: It's a transcendence of self-consciousness.

KP: It's that moment, to use the H.D. image you quote, that all the butterflies are hatched from the words?

RD: M. Valery, not my favourite poet, has a book on *La Danse* where he says it stupendously. When Pound talks about love of poetics I think he calls it the dance of the intellect among words; in that sense consciousness transcends its attention to what it looks like itself. *The Pindar Poem* describes feet in the poem dancing, and "you passed the count" means that you're in it. When I'm in a poem I don't count the lines. Zukofsky said to me of one of the *A's* that it was "eights." So I said what do you mean—eight words, eight syllables? He said I don't know, if I haven't got a feel for words and syllables by this time I shouldn't even be in the business. He's counting eight words.

KP: It's again the idea of being in it, being inside.

RD: Well, you can find enough announcements about being inside the thing instead of being outside and stepping away and looking at it. That early proposition of mine from the 1952 Notes has continuously been misinterpreted, the one where I said all my visions are revisions. I don't revise. It seems perfectly clear to me that if I'm going to go back, then I'm in it again, and I see it again or I don't see it. I've got no stance that I can imagine from which you could correct it. If you're in it again you can be back in worse trouble than you ever were, and I've never really been able to understand what in the world a person was doing revising. I remember Everson showing me a manuscript where he had some word and he crossed it out and he had about five words above it. Finally he writes in the word he had in the beginning. So I said, well, how do you choose among the others. There's no principle involved at all. There's tinkering or something to make it sound better. Yeats is a corrector or refiner and I've rewritten passages of poems but they've always needed complete revisions of the poems, not just of individual words.

KP: You're close here to the Stein idea that composition is the thing seen by everyone in the living they're doing.

RD: She's riding a good horse and there's none better.

KP: And it's a principle shared by many San Francisco Abstract Expressionists. In one of the *Letters*, "The breaking up of cold clouds," you make a direct reference to Hassel Smith when you write, "it releases freshets, which I've seen advancing before my speech in the paintings of Hassel Smith. These remind me of the appearance of crowds at the margin

of solitude and that there might be a crowd of one who writes," and then you add something that seems particularly relevant to the painters, "thus our invention is to disturb anew the spiritual arrangements."

RD: Yes, I think this is the force of Still. These are powerful propositions of feeling. It's almost like Anacreon's laying it on Egypt. He really proposes a kind of space and a time of painting. It's a one man revolution.

KP: Those great gaps and rips that you talk of in *Writing Writing* (Appendix II), do they owe something to Still?

RD: Probably, but I'm seeing that all the time.

KP: You also say, "these violent recreations betray the secret history of our time"—so again as with the Expressionists, this is a pushing up of the emotional facts.

RD: Right. This would be the "nation" again, Charles's idea of "another kind of nation." I mean the poem doesn't provide one, of course, but it does sow seeds and seeds the ground with possibilities.

KP: The sowing that takes place on the various levels of *The Pindar Poem* seems analogous to the Abstract Expressionist dispersal technique?

RD: Oh certainly. Charles was one of the reasons I went back to the city and so forth. I was also fascinated by H.D.'s Moravians. She came from a Moravian brotherhood. What they had was that, since Christendom was bankrupt with the Protestants and Catholics at each other's throats, Christianity could only continue, if you didn't form another Church, as a secret group of people inside the Church. And the writer and the reader or the painter and the people who truly look at the canvas are not connected in any way other than volitions, and that's the point that's so important for me. When you find a book of poetry you want to read it's entirely your volition, it's been written in such a volition, and this is the dissemination of something. It's quite the contrary of creed that everybody takes together.

KP: What were Olson's feelings about painting?

RD: Oh Charles thought painting was a form of therapy for people who weren't very bright. There are painting propositions, of course, in *Projective Verse*, or at least we can assume there are. And the Lectures on Aesthetics were specifically upon looking at paintings in terms of field as in *Projective Verse*. The Gestalt ones were about looking at canvas and they

get into trouble with music about what was happening in time. What they thought made it easy for them as gestalts was that they saw the canvas as a boundary and something happens inside a boundary and this gave them a whole metaphor for the way they were sure aesthetic experience moved. But for the poem, or a piece of music, its boundary is in time and you can't show it on a page or a book. Charles loved diagrams and he may have had his troubles with painting because as far as he was concerned if you're making a mark on a piece of paper it was a diagram. I can tell you one incident that leads me to think he felt painting was therapeutic: when I was leaving Black Mountain he said to me "I can understand why you think there should be music here because you write plays and you want some sort of music for that, but why do we have to have a painter?" This was at the time when Wolpe was leaving and when many of the G.I.'s were studying with Fiore and had come because of the previous painting reputation—De Kooning, Rauschenberg, the Post-Albers period. As for these cross-overs we're talking about, Robin Blaser is one of the few poets I know who was responsive to music and painting, and Jonathan Williams, of course, was keenly interested in both arts.

KP: Creeley would be another, and I think Olson wrote an introduction to Guston's first exhibition.

RD: Could be he knew Guston.

KP: Who was Blaser interested in?

RD: He was mostly with the local painters both here and in Vancouver.

KP: And Spicer seems to have been interested in painting although that didn't seem to provide any of the common ground between either of you?

RD: Initially in 47, 48, Kabbalism, the poem as possibily being a form of magic. I was still not settled on poetry as an art, as hours of work. We got magic that was directive and manipulative of situations. And Spicer was always manipulating situations and also, of course, evoking. I still evoke. In *Structure of Rime*, the master of rime is an evoked presence like a person in a dream. Mike Davidson has just sent me a chapter of an article he's written on *Opening of the Field* and one of his criticisms is directed against the appearance of the people in *Structure of Rime*. By making them entirely fictive, like they were made-up people, they didn't come out right. The appearance of the Master of Rime was, in a primitive sort of way, like somebody coming to you in a dream and telling you something. With the Carpenter, for example, I tell him I know you're not and this is not a poem;

I know you're not just something out of my psyche. Davidson doesn't like this framework. He talks of me proposing figures such as the Master of Rime, but I would term it calling them in or calling them up, or as simply recalling them. To stay within the boundaries of a strictly contemporary and sophisticated psychology would be that you recall them, but they were people. Whereas in his sense he saw them as improvised. I mean I thought the Emperor of Ice Cream might be an improvised character. I find Stevens shockingly frivolous because I don't imagine such an entity, but the Master of Rime I really tried with him.

KP: In *The Opening of the Field* are the propositions of that particular poem, the propositions of the whole book. There are five of them, the first being "Skill, the precision the hand knows necessary to operate" (*Propositions*); then there's the "sending out into the field of the poem where the unexpected must come."

RD: That sending out is exactly related to what I was saying about the Master of Rime. There is a field beyond the poem that the poem belongs to.

KP: Then there's the keeping that allows you to bring your life complete.

RD: Well, everything that has come into the poem has come into your keeping, that's why you tell the truth about it. Let's face it, for the person listening to the poem there's no way of guaranteeing that what comes into the poem is actually the truth, that's not why you're practising truth within a poem. But when something comes into your keeping that's quite different. And also you keep to it. The other great question is how come you keep to this practice of a poem as art and as entire attention. Some poets don't. The idea of keeping keepers is also there, it's always got that double edge. I would use keeper in its full spiritual office, then give it a Freudian twist—the sense of being retentive, of not letting things go, of keeping things to yourself. Remember, *Propositions* is one of the few poems written about Jess and me; I'm not usually writing about him, so there's a little black humour in the situation of the spider and his fly. You come in enraptured into the web.

KP: The keeping as a possessive force.

RD: Right, it seems to me that it's always a question that we keep the things we love and we expect them to be kept, so that love is also a keeper. I have a lot of things about keeping vows and keeping orders in different things through several poems. Keeping also gives range; even within a

single poem such as *The Venice Poem* everything all the way from dark rhetoric is permitted to come in.

KP: Another question I wanted to ask you was about the cover Jess did for *O'Ryan*.

RD: The drawing! Well when White Rabbit wanted to do a book by Charles, Charles sent a manuscript numbered 246810 and Jess did a cover for it which was *O'Ryan*. Jess did the big figure of Orion in the sky, a white line on a black background. When Charles saw the cover he sent back 13579 and so the cover had to be done again. I just don't understand it but Charles said he hadn't thought of Orion. *O'Ryan's* a funny poem, it seems to be talking about Creeley some of the time. Charles was always odd about punning. I saw to it that California bought a letter of his to Eigner warning him against my punning. Yet by the mid-sixties Charles is himself talking about punning, although his first instinct was to rule it out.

KP: But his use of word origin suggests that he's punning?

RD: Yes but those were the traces he wanted to cover at that point. He wanted to say, I never pun, honest John, so he wouldn't be seen as using them. But, of course, *Paterson* is a place where the pun would come in marvellously, it's very operative there. Pound doesn't like punning and practically has no puns.

KP: Was Eigner, in fact, moving towards punning?

RD: No, he was in correspondence with me and it was one of the evidences that Charles was worried about, people getting corrupted by Duncan. It was absurd, I mean Eigner was Eigner. Spicer punned a great deal, it was central to him. One of the differences between Blaser's poetry and Spicer's is that although Blaser follows the Spicer line he really isn't a punner.

KP: When you're illustrating with Jess how do you set about that in, say, the *Book of Resemblances*?

RD: Where Jess was drawing and illustrating, those were illustrated after the fact of the text.

KP: And the same with Helen Adam's ballads, he's simply working off the image in the text.

RD: Right. The only place there was collaboration between us was *Caesar's Gate*. When Creeley and Indiana worked together, Indiana had, of course, done numbers before and Creeley suggested numbers. I think it worked both ways, Creeley was going back and forth to New York. They both began on the book at the same time and it was being worked out by constant interchange.

KP: The *Book of Resemblances* contains a very broad range of Jess's drawing styles.

RD: Yes, they went over some years; the drawings for the *Borderguard* go back some ten years before the writing of the book.

KP: Your own drawings for the Black Sparrow book?

RD: This was a disaster because the originals were not taken care of and in order to economise in making that thing they took the notebook apart—it had drawings on both sides of the page—and picked out 65 drawings from all of them.

KP: I'd like you to comment on what seems to me to be a key quotation with regard to your work and Jess's work. You write, "Jess finally, like me, would emerge in an art diverse and having as its key, the collage of diversities and derivation, whatever its authenticity, returning to and drawing itself from the field of arts, not as a thing in itself to incorporate specifically painting values, but as a medium for the life of the spirit."

RD: Well socially this city has a lot of aspects in which a life of the spirit can go on; but the figure of home, or how you make an area in which you can live, depends on making something in which you can become spiritually true. I mean truth is not just the actual. The problem is how do you live inside an environment that is not simply spiritually vacant, as they said in the 20s, but polluted. I mean try a room or two in one of the suburbs and let it dawn upon you what you're sitting in; the architect has really seen to it that there's no sign of grace in that space. People live in little areas, I think the reason they wear costume is to be divided away from the walls and the floor they walk on. And again where Art got derailed was when the shopkeepers started to run the whole show and it became a commodity. And now we make a living out of it because it's gotten to be a values commodity and not just painting.

KP: I'd also like you to comment on the extension of Cassirer's idea that you make in *The Truth and Life of Myth* where you say that both language

and myth have an origin in spiritual ecstasy and that consequently the word has power to lead us to an imagined truth.

RD: Well ecstasy I'm little worried by since it means standing outside of where it is. I can take the idea of transcendence if it means that we transcended our self-interest or purpose, purpose meaning what I'm going to gain or lose psychologically. Had *The Venice Poem* only been a rite in order to be reborn myself it would not have been a poem. When I say it was a magic poem, I mean it was both a rite and a poem. I felt the poem would deliver me, so I had a purpose, but the poem in its dimensions gets outside of that because the poem is more thrilling than whether I was going to get rescued or not. I think it's James who talks about fittingness, because it works in science and mathematics just like it works in art; it's where they're together. The most surprising thing, in the true sense of aesthetics, is that we recognize to some degree that something fits the situation. Happiness actually means it's happening in the right place and so that what governs the writing in a poem is our recognition that it fits. What it fits doesn't occur yet, but the fact that it's got fittingness tells us what the next thing is going to be. We don't have to select. The other picture is that you select—how did the poet select this thing? No, you follow the feeling of fittingness and don't work if you haven't got that feeling. And that feeling of fittingness I would say is identical with truth, true to the elements of the thing. And more and more, as for instance in *Passages*, I keep whatever happens. Have you seen that film where I'm writing? Well, I knew there that I had to keep it. I have to discover both what it's true to, this abominable little line of alliterative m's, and what it's doing coming in a passage which is charged with political opinion which is the least likely place for anything to be true to anything. The atrocity of the alliterations is more shocking to me than my swinging out with my loosely conceived outburst at what goes on in the political world. I think that my controversy with Denise about the poem and the War and so forth was that it seemed to me that the only actual model a poet provides for behaviour is how entirely attentive to the poem he is and not self-interested. You see, in a dream you can't be self-interested, you don't get to choose. You can be attentive or you can lose it but you don't get to start not being true. When you tell the dream you can start fudging it, and then you lose the whole thing. Truth to me is still not given. We could earnestly follow the truth and discover a year later the truth about it and a year later the truth etc., because in the beginning the sense of fittingness is the apprehension of all the things that might belong to it. That tells us what the fit is. But as we see more things it can belong to, the whole sense of fitting can change.

KP: The authenticity is simply the being present.

RD: Right, and that's the essence of my criticism of Blaser's translations. Spicer also argued that there were spirits outside the universe and that they were invading language. He came straight up against my feeling that the powers of the language were the actual words' existences extending in time of human uses as we know they do. One of the lines is associational, the potentiality of the word is quite actual; if we imagine ourselves endlessly researching we unwind in any word this huge lore of the word. And that seemed to me to be the source of the meaningfulness of the poem, not something that I knew, but something that I recognize when I'm working.

FROM

POET, BE LIKE GOD

BY

LEWIS ELLINGHAM

photo by Joanne Kyger

"On Duncan's porch, late 50s," from left to right:
Robert Duncan, Ebbe Borregaard, Jack Spicer

LEWIS ELLINGHAM

"The King's Two Bodies":

From *Poet, Be Like God: Jack Spicer's Circle in San Francisco, 1956-1965*

The following two chapters from a book–in–progress, *Poet, Be Like God,* sub–titled, "Jack Spicer's Circle in San Francisco, 1956–1965," collectively I will describe with the name I have given the second of the two chapters, "The King's Two Bodies." The reason: Ernst Kantorowicz, in a story told in part toward the end of this selection, a professor at U.C. Berkeley and protege of the celebrated German poet, Stefan George, before Kantorowicz's exit from Germany, entitled a great work on medieval jurisprudence with this name. In *The King's Two Bodies* Kantorowicz emphasized the distinction between the personal and legal entities both called "king." The book grew from his lectures at Berkeley, which had been attended—with excitement—by Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan. In this excitement, which extended into the social, the intellectual and the political, Kantorowicz serves in some sense as linear transmitter from the largely homosexual esthetic cult of the German poet, the *George Kreis,* of which Kantorowicz was a member, to the in some ways similar poetic/artistic grouping that is my subject, the *Spicer Kreis* [Jack Spicer's Circle].

Thus "The Poet's Two Bodies" was once the proposed title for my book; later I changed this in favor of an element in Spicer's *Imaginary Elegies,* familiar and tempting too, for the same reason as the earlier title had been, that the *distinctive,* priestly aspect of the poet–as–poet was a central notion of the Spicer Circle. One should, however, understand these poets did not extend the practice of dualism into the poetry itself, as Blaser cautions in his remarks in the final chapter of this selection.

My book, *Poet, Be Like God*—with the collection and transcription of over a million words of oral history to support it, not to mention the many memoirs contributors have made—has been in the making since May 1982. A first draft now exists, and is to be edited in 1987 by John Granger, whose M.A. thesis at Simon Fraser discussed the question of "the Alien" in Spicer's work. Granger now studies in the Ph.D. program at U.C. San Diego. The research materials, duplicated, have been placed on deposit with this university's New Poetry Archive, giving the public access to my work.

The book itself, seeking a publisher—contacts have been made—should hopefully appear in this decade. Chapters and research-interviews or memoirs have been published regularly in recent years in several magazines. The current issues of *Ironwood* and *ACTS* contain such selections.

Lewis Ellingham
September 1986

"The Outlands"

Five years from the writing of *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether* remained for Jack Spicer to complete his "Books." In what seems to a later view as regular, even heavy production—but at the time seemed both to Spicer and to his friends as somehow a rather sparsely found product—the books unfolded: 1961, *Lament for the Makers;* 1962, *The Holy Grail*; 1964, *Language*; 1965, *Book of Magazine Verse.* The hiatus between 1962 and 1964, then seemingly a long one, was filled in part by Spicer's living with Ron Primack, during which time Ron wrote *The Late Major Horace Bell of the Los Angeles Rangers*, a project Spicer was very close to throughout. So that no year can be considered to be sterile. Yet how many nights one heard in the North Beach bars the circle's writers—Spicer especially—lamenting a day without poetry. In hindsight, after one has experienced years as similar units of time that these young writers experienced as a few days or weeks—perhaps a month!—the complaint seems almost arrogant. Then, energy crackled like a lightning-charged storm within and around the places and situations of these authors' and artists' lives.

How the energy was found, how held and used—how personal lives and art interplayed—was often, for the Spicer circle, a consequence of Jack's moods and actions. In a letter to Robin Blaser, then still living in Boston but soon to return to San Francisco after several years' absence working for Harvard University's library, Robert Duncan describes a scene with Spicer. It is interesting for the light it throws on the possessive and demanding nature of Spicer's relations in friendship, his needs as poet, and his understanding of honesty and truth in every kind of situation (all usually mixed into a single stance to the outside world at a given time). Though clear-minded and direct, Jack seldom was without an opinion, a point of view, an attitude that seemed to say "this singularity is the truth of me, of

the world." All this was sometimes modestly expressed, sometimes not. Duncan's letter is dated February 28, 1959:

Dear Robin,

I saw Spicer in Berkeley last Tuesday—where now he is not only on that research grant [Pacific States dialect atlas, for the Linguistic Department] but also teaching a class as instructor in the English Department. And prodded him about your writing you hadn't heard from him. I hadn't thot there would actually be anything back of his not corresponding, but he has wound himself up on the idea you are guilty against *Poetry* on two counts—the major one, that you live with Felts (which Spicer has long nursed as Felts is *bad* for you, etc.)[1] and the second and immediate one that you are going to Europe (instead of coming back here . . .) but Spicer said if you were sincere etc. you would live somewhere like New Orleans without any money (Spicer has recently been receiving letters from an anonymous admirer in New Orleans: who writes for instance that Spicer is the only poet besides himself who knows what love is—which it turns out is loneliness and longing for love). His resistance was such that he set himself against the possibility that your new poems were what I said they were. Deeper—there is the defense of longing for love against the practice of love. There was the current in Jack's discussion too that you had betrayed friendship (deserted San Francisco (Jack Spicer) for Europe; and Jack Spicer the friend for Jim Felts the false friend) . . . well, I have, as I pointed out to Jack, been fairly un*poet* or anti–poet myself if going to Europe and not being in San Francisco counts. (And Jack, when [Duncan's *The Opening of*] *The Field* was completed said: 'When are you moving back from Stinson Beach now?'[2]) I didn't go further and say straight out that if there *were* any alternative proposed to me between Jack and the way I live I would not be confused.

I know part of what Jack feels—for I wish you were here and now—yet how quickly the time goes. There is hubris (but that a virtue of Jack's declaration) in Jack's taking the power to unite and separate, to wed and divorce within the order of Poetry. And think how long—from *The Venice Poem* thru to my return from Europe[3]—*I* was absolutely wrong. There are times when my own prejudices for the image of poet as free agent and emperor of the universe argue against the 'sheltered homosexual domesticity' as N.O. Brown calls our household. And if I detect that in Artaud the poet must pass from posseur (lure for his fate, to which he is not yet united) thru fake, only by persistence to arrive at a real (foreign)

nature; and find the same pattern in Ignatius Loyola: in my own life, that I am determined shall be subjected to the earth and the sky, and humbled to a household in whose laws to find a full pride—is a pose I might struggle for—the futile gestures of weeding, spring bears rank witness against the solidity of my desire.

It seemed to me in Boston that Jack posed himself as a 'problem' in order to make a contest in which you would be deserting Jim for Jack.[4] In part you provided some of the possibility, for you hadn't come to the solitary knowledge in Poetry where Jack or I etc. would no longer seem to be *close* to the work in a sense Felts might not be. But the work *is* solitary, and seen thus: one has strength in the solitude that takes the place of loneliness for solitude is within the practice of love. The mute entrance towards fulfillment.

Your can never satisfy Jack's requirements: it's for Jack to satisfy yours.

love,
Robert[5]

Duncan's references to Jack Spicer's life in Boston present another note of curiosity about this poet, his identification with California, rather in the spirit Duncan notices concerning personal loyalty in friendship in the letter just quoted. Spicer had made his one trip East in 1955–56, to the New York and Boston areas, and had found them wanting; he too was found wanting in these scenes. An extant letter from the poet, Frank O'Hara, to the artist, Jasper Johns (July 15, 1959), in listing the writings of the new poets, East and West coasts, says of Jack Spicer, "he always disappoints me, but others think him very important." Joe LeSueur, who knew both O'Hara (his roomate for years) and Spicer, speaks of this connection: "Frank O'Hara knew Jack Spicer, but only slightly. Frank and I used to run into Jack at the old San Remo's in the Village during the brief period Jack lived in New York. I remember liking Jack a lot more than Frank did—in fact, I was very fond of him, and a couple of years later, when John Button had cancer and was being treated in San Francisco and I'd come to visit John, I spent quite a bit of time with Jack. He was terrific to me, very hospitable, and I remember telling Frank about Jack's dreary apartment when I got back to New York. We both thought it typical of Jack to have such a place in a city that was so beautiful and afforded so many people terrific views. But to get back to Frank—what he felt about him. Jack rubbed him the wrong way, just as another Jack (Kerouac) did. Frank loved New York, and Jack knew it, yet he was forever complaining about the city to Frank, saying how much nicer S.F. was, and Frank would say why don't

you go back then—and of course Jack did, and I don't think Frank ever saw him again." (Both poets were to die at forty, O'Hara killed by a beach vehicle at Fire Island a year after Spicer died of alcoholism in San Francisco County General Hospital.)

Joe LeSueur goes on to say that "Frank represented a very urbane and (to Jack, I believe) a campy kind of poetry, or maybe he felt it was a little effete, I'm not sure; but I do remember Jack not much liking Frank's work. But one must remember that this was the early [actually, mid–] 50s, before Frank wrote most of his important and distinctive poetry. And Frank, though he could see that Jack had talent, wasn't very attracted to his poetry. Then, too, Frank was used to winning over people, and Jack simply would not be won over by him. And as I've suggested, they were a little competitive, Frank representing N.Y. and Jack being the champion of the Bay Area poets." With apologies Joe LeSueur remarks on something quite likely true: "This might sound terrible to say, and nothing should be made of it, but I do believe that Frank would have been more receptive to Jack's considerable appeal if he (Jack) had not been so physically unattractive. But then of course Jack would have been an entirely different person if he had been good–looking, for certainly his being so abrasive, truculent and even slightly bitter related to his unprepossessing appearance. That's my opinion, and I may be wrong—it's just a feeling I had at the time." After saying that O'Hara and Kerouac thought even less of each other, and at the Cedar Bar had a sour verbal exchange, Joe LeSueur concludes that "Jack Spicer and Frank never had it out, never got that unpleasant to each other. They simply rubbed each other the wrong way, that's all."[6]

Of the incident mentioned by LeSueur in his letter concerning a visit by the painter, John Button, a native San Franciscan who made his home and career in New York, Button tells of the time he was in a San Francisco hospital, in a memoir on Spicer: "Jack had a deep sense of loyalty. The loyalty may have been distorted and mercurial, but it was felt, I think. I had a serious operation in the U.C. Medical Center in 1960. It was unclear whether I was to die or live. Shortly after surgery I was lying in bed when I heard a struggle and loud voices in the Hall. Jack appeared at the door, being held back by nurses. He was smiling with malicious amusement. Tacitly, he held up a pint–sized crumbled bag and shouted, 'For you, Johnny!' I asked the nurses to let him in. He was very happy to see me. He urged me not to stop smoking (—which I haven't—), and offered me the pint of cheap brandy he had brought with him. He looked awful and smelled worse. But that visit sure picked up my spirits. It was a bright spot in a very dark time. Jack must have known it would be. That was the last time I saw Jack."[7]

Landis Everson, who knew the Berkeley Renaissance poets well in the 1940s as fellow student and friend and was at that time publishing his own

poetry in national journals like *The Kenyon Review*, regarded Spicer's positions *vis–a–vis* Eastern poets (East Coast/Oriental in this case might well be the same) as basically hostile for personal reasons.

"Jack considered himself a Californian"—both Everson and Spicer were born in southern California, Everson a native of the San Diego area—"probably Jack's body became Californian: some of the highest places in the United States, and the lowest places, the driest, and the wettest as well perhaps. As you know, Jack always was at war with the East. It went on with beer and baseball and all that."

I asked, "Did you ever hear Jack Spicer talk about other poets? like Frank O'Hara, say?"

"Oh yes. He didn't like them. He disliked John Ashbery intensely. He called him 'a faggot poet.' John's first book was called *Some Trees* and Jack always made it a point of pronouncing it "'Some Twees.'" Landis chuckled and I remarked, "I can hear him do that." Everson continued, "So he was jealous of John Ashbery—John Ashbery was an Eastern poet, from Harvard."

Spicer's relations with those outside his geographic circle could be especially odd. His books, and the publications he edited or influenced—*J* magazine and *Open Space*, both magazine and press, as well as White Rabbit Press—were supposed not to be distributed outside the Bay Area. Spicer somehow felt this exclusively involved what Robert Duncan calls in his recently quoted letter "orders of Poetry," with his groups, his personal influence, at the center of the valid. His motive was less personal than professional—to whatever this concept can meaningfully be associated with for this eccentric man—in that the poetry Spicer believed could be, and was then being written had to be made in the favored circumstances of the San Francisco region. These need not be identified—they never were by him—except with reference to his personal antecedents as poet in the university environment of Berkeley, in the persons of Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and himself, and in the community of San Francisco's North Beach. All other places, and persons loyal to them, suffered by comparison, as indicated by Joe LeSeuer's description of Spicer's attitude toward Frank O'Hara and that poet's work in New York.

George Stanley, too, noticed the relation of Jack Spicer both to place and value of creative work, in Spicer's own understandings. "If Spicer had the feeling that he was 'the poet' of his time, it would be from San Francisco. Or California perhaps."

I suggested, "—sort of suspending a recognition of the geographies elsewhere?"

"Yeah, that's right," George confirmed. "The geographies of elsewhere really didn't exist. The further away you got from San Francisco the more

the real and the imaginary mixed and so you had New York—the symbol of wickedness—and you had Oz—"

"What was Oz?" I asked. "Also New York?"

"No, Oz was—"

"The Place?" I offered. This bar was ripe for Jack at the time.

"The Place, yeah," George accepted.

"Did London or Paris exist—even more splendid, in magic?" I took off.

"I think in one of Jack's little plays, or in *After Lorca*, something like 'the lights of Philadelphia twinkled in the distance' or something like that," Stanley appraised, "—those places just didn't exist."

One notices too the deterministic tendency in Spicer noted by Duncan in his letter to Blaser above, in Duncan's remark, "that Spicer set himself by rule against the possibility that your new poems were what I said they were." Poetry flourished in certain conditions, and only in those conditions; it reflected personal states of being, which in turn must contain the light of a kind of poetic worthiness—the truth of the person—before the poetry could be acceptable. Otherwise the poetry could not be good, must fail.

At another point Robert Duncan had other thoughts on the subject."Jack was a priest," he responded to a direct question I had asked him on this specific point. "So is Robin a priest. So am I a priest. Because words were themselves some kind of thing that we administered. And priest is the right word. All of us understood, and talked about it when we came across the medieval studies, that the priest did not qualify the Mass—the poem is the Mass. The priest can be an idiot!

"The priest, as a matter of fact, since the priest is administering the Mass—or performing it—and not receiving it, can then be in a state of sin and it doesn't make any difference at all. That's how we saw the poem. I don't think Jack ever made that error." The distinction between Duncan's comment in his letter to Blaser concerning Spicer's rejection of Blaser's poems in advance, and the comment concerning the poet as priest whose spiritual condition made no difference to the quality of an art work he presided over delivering to the world, is perhaps the quality of "dictation"—how and whether one can correctly "hear" the poem as it comes from wherever poems come from. Dictation, at any rate, was something much on Spicer's mind in these years, and will be more fully explored in chapters to come.

I asked Stan Persky, who in 1964 was editor and publisher of the magazine *Open Space*, just what he thought the point of Jack Spicer's insistence on his rules about where, and to whom, poetry magazines should go. My question: "what did you think—really think—about Jack's views, for example, not letting *Open Space* out of the area? Did you take it seriously?"

"Oh yeah," replied Persky, "I thought all of those rules were true and necessary to maintain the purity of the art."[8]

This was generally understood in the community of writers surrounding Jack Spicer, and by everybody who knew him. Certainly Spicer's circle was expected to respect such views. Exceptions were made only by Spicer himself; others invited a charge—seriously intended—of heresy or worse if one attempted to interpret Spicer's intentions for him by acting in his name, or by opposing him even in small ways. In correspondence with Donald Allen, preserved in the University of California's Bancroft Library, several Spicer letters to Allen record Spicer's permission to him—then an editor for Grove Press in New York—to use copies of *J* magazine, which Spicer would provide him (strictly on a case–by–case basis), to influence one reader or audience or another locally. But Don Allen was cautioned to be seriously selective about giving *J* to others. That copies of the magazine went to New York at all probably was not known to Spicer's friends, or proteges at least, in the Bay Area. It would be uncharacteristic of Spicer to admit to doing business with "outsiders." Or to deny so, should he be asked.

Ron Loewinsohn told this story. "LeRoi Jones was visiting San Francisco and unbelievably he and Jack got along very well."

"Yes," I agreed, "it is surprising." I then asked if LeRoi Jones had yet become Imamu Amiri Baraka, his new identity after he had become exclusively devoted to the work of black interests nationally and elsewhere.

"I don't think so," Loewinsohn answered me. "I think he was just at that point, making the turn into being a real black nationalist, becoming one. I think this was, again, one of Jack's sort of perverse things: everyone expected Jack to beat up on LeRoi, verbally. LeRoi's a very charming man."

"Yes, he is." I had met him with his wife and friends, a mixed couple and company racially, at his apartment near New York's Cooper Union in 1963. Even at a time Jones had begun avoiding white people, he once acted considerately to me when he had occasion to notice I needed help (destitute, I was passing down a New York street with copies of *Black Mountain Reviews* in hand, wondering where I might sell them; we met, talked, and he made useful suggestions).

"A really clever, personable [person], and one of the most charming people in the world—and Jack," continued Ron Loewinsohn—"partly Jack fell for this charm. Also, it was the kind of delicious pleasure of having all the people who were expecting Jack to 'take on' this East Coast popular writer—Jack made friends with him instead. Jack was always looking to [do] the thing you were not expecting."

Loewinsohn and I talked about Spicer at his bar table, viewing a television broadcast of a sports event, a baseball game for example. I wondered about what the conversation might be in such circumstances. I

doubted Jack would talk about anything except "just the game. He wouldn't be inclined to refer to its possible symbolic values or anything of that kind."

"Exactly right! Exactly right: never, never, never symbolized the game! There was a lot of apparently cynical, or at least very skeptical talk about the courage—this was in the days of John Brodie—Brodie was always chicken-shit—he would punt rather than go for the tight situation." Asking whether Brodie had been singled out because he was simply a famous player, Loewinsohn said, "I don't really think so. I think Jack wanted grace under pressure, and courage in the face of obstacles. When you gave up and punted the ball away, you played it safe, which disturbed Jack."[9]

Fran Herndon spoke of Jack Spicer's interests in two favorite subjects, sports and California. Referring to her husband, she said, "Jim and Jack shared this California history together, and the sports-statistical thing together. We went to baseball games. I would prepare this elaborate lunch and we would go." Fran described trips to Giants games at Candlestick Park and other events. "They knew every player and the statistics on that player. Occasionally we would go watch basketball on television at a bar." After being told that the details of sports were not particularly interesting to her, I asked Fran, "Did you have any trouble amusing yourself while all of this exchange of statistical information went on?" She answered, "Of course Jack was amusing—I mean the game was amusing. He commented all the time, if things went wrong. Everything had to be sort of perfect, right? Each Saturday had to be pretty much the same. We couldn't have things go wrong, like the car, or not finding a place to park, or having somebody not play. It just had to go like clockwork; it had to be pretty much the same each time. Jack's whole *life* was like that."

"He liked regularity, I recall," I said. "I used to say you could set your watch by his arrival at the bar."

"Exactly," Fran Herndon confirmed. "Or his arrival at our house. And his arrival at Aquatic Park. And his arrival to dinner."

I added, "he was never late?"

"I have never known him to be late. The only appointment I ever missed with him was when Jay was ill [a son was striken, desperately ill]. When Jay was seriously ill and Jim was in Merced with Jay and I left Jack a note even that day, that I wouldn't be there when he came. He was coming to lunch. And he was very upset that day. He *was* very disoriented. But the thing he mentioned to me, the first thing he mentioned to me was the fact I'd written him such a cogent note. It was reassuring to him. I told him why I wasn't there, where I was going, and what was wrong."

"Right," I said, "that sort of sounds like *him*, too. I mean, the kind of specific information that he seemed to respect most was the kind of specific—"

Fran interrupted this with, "oh yeah. So I was this very steady person in his life. I was always there for him. In the end I could not maintain what he was asking of me. It was a source of great guilt for me when he died."

"Really?"

"Well, it was only normal. He was somebody very important in my life. He saw in me something greater than I saw in myself. *I* think."

Fran had also spoken of Spicer's relation to another game, pinball. "The very first evening I spent with Jack in my life was this tour of North Beach. The evening ended with Jack going to Mike's Pool Hall to play pinball. I was supposed to concentrate on the numbers [necessary to win the game]. I remember that clearly. Naturally I didn't realize that was my task; that was absolutely the whole reason for being there, right?" And though the explanation was odd, it was in fact right—Jack the magician at work.[10]

In conversations with both Ron Primack and Graham Mackintosh the importance of the pinball routine for Jack Spicer was confirmed. It was, too, with an acquaintance of Spicer's in Berkeley, Gary Bottone, who wrote to me, "I saw Jack with some frequency at the White Horse bar in Berkeley where he wore out a succession of pinball machines. He told me once he wanted to be buried under one." While Ron Primack belived that Spicer played pinball to make money—mentioning occasions he would win to supplement an evening's drinking money—Graham Mackintosh thought his purposes somewhat other. Said Graham, "it cost him money; he never made money off it."

"Do you think so?" I asked, having an opposing testimony—unstated to Mackintosh—of at least one other witness in mind.

"I know so. It might put an extra $10 in his pocket every so often," thus confirming Ron Primack's contention.

"What was the price of a game?"

"Dime a game—dime a game won."

"Won what?"

"If you won a game, you could get a dime back. If you won fifty games you got $5. We played at Mike's, because Mike's was one of the few places that didn't hassle you about paying off—the bartender would just come by and look, and if the games were there, he'd reach under [the machine] and erase them by pushing a button, and give you the five, seven, ten dollars. I actually won that big. Jack never did. And a lot of times we have played pinball."

"Is there any skill in the game?"

"Yeah, there was—a low-key finesse skill. It has to do with how hard you hit the ball. It would tilt very easily."[11]

Robert Duncan, in another fashion, had something to say about Jack Spicer and the games that fascinated and pleased him. Referring to the student years in Berkeley, Duncan said, "Jack had a time trying to find somebody who would play chess with him. And games meant a lot. This bridge group [the subject of Chapter 10], by the way, you could never get Robin Blaser or me to be in. It didn't take Jack long to learn we wouldn't be any good as bridge partners. And he tried to get some of the bridge partners into the Magic Workshop, but they weren't any good as poetry partners. So bridge was something more than bridge: it's *Alice in Wonderland* for Jack. And poetry was something like a game. But a really serious game. Jack was superb with a magic workshop because magic was a game."

Throughout our conversations—there were three of them—Robert Duncan and I touched upon the themes, Spicer and games, Spicer and homosexuality, Spicer and a circle of followers as poets and friends. I am fond of using the German term, *Kreis*—circle—in recognition of the poet, Stefan George's association with the poetic (and largely homosexual) circle of which George was more than first among equals: the *George Kreis*. So with my idea of Jack Spicer.

Concerning this, Robert Duncan—the quote exact, if somewhat ambiguous—had this to say: "It wasn't a *Spicer Kreis*. Once we look at these figures we find out that the *Spicer Kreis* has trouble coexisting because it wants to be—it wants to have—its power. And I am the one who deprived it of its power. My interest in other things deprived it of its power. I remember coming into Gino & Carlo's one night, and coming in George Stanley grabbed me and said, 'Well, now you're here.' And I said, 'You mean so that you can have the necessary four homosexuals, George? to run your little magic circle? No way!' I said." Duncan chuckled. One gathers "four homosexuals" refers to persons present in the bar—a curious (because why "four"?) relation to numbers, shapes and events obtains here. Duncan and I did not explore these details. He continued, "That sort of thing: but that was what I was unforgiven for; I was not in the necessary circle—only there like I was anywhere else."

Duncan's choice of word "coexisting" in this context is not clear to me for the sense of his words suggests to me he meant "cohering," that Spicer's circle had trouble finding enough "magic" to hold together. It may be that Duncan meant a coexistence, on the one hand, of Spicer's psychic/magic (and homosexual) circle and Duncan's own circle of influences on the other hand. Perhaps, too, these images of power are simply epicyclical to even larger motions of "power" sensed by Duncan, social, esthetic, intellectual.

"Had I been, there would have been a formidable amount of psychic power going in the *Kreis*. It would not just have been a circle." Again, curious: circles of differing strengths or orders. Here Duncan referred to a

topic he and I had been discussing, namely, the presence of women and heterosexuals in the circle. "Joanne Kyger was read out in these same years," Duncan suggested, "although I think most of that seemed to have been coming from some spiff that Persky and Blaser had with the idea of Joanne. Yet Jack was cooperative with it." These observations were, and are, strictly Robert Duncan's views. George Stanley had discussed the same point with me—that a woman would have some difficulty in the Spicer circle—conclusions not unlike Duncan's at a general level, but without any notion of (nor support for) a structure of homosexual magic. In fact Joanne Kyger remained a principal of Spicer–influenced publications and society, as much after as before her several years' stay in Japan, until Jack Spicer's death. Yet I believe there remains a certain essential rightness in Robert Duncan's ideas in these observations just quoted, which in effect emphasize a homosexual drift to the group by the 1960s to a point nearing exclusiveness.

I asked Duncan, "So what are you saying, that women had no place?"

Replied Duncan, "Jack the poet, the one looking for powers, draws on women poets as major powers in the same sense he does on men poets. But for his *Kreis*—which is not the whole of poetry at all, but is a circle of magic intensification—he needed a monosexual circle of witches. And as I said: the impossibility of it. I'm convinced they also had to be alcoholic, which I wasn't going to be; they had to be fervent spectators of baseball—think about it. If you go to the poems, baseball is as serious as politics as whatever."

I noticed, "Well, some were allowed one omission." Continuing, I thought of an example. "I don't think Harold Dull was interested in baseball."

"Oh no, no!" Duncan gleefully pounced. "I meant everybody in the *Kreis* in some sense wasn't in it. Remember, I wasn't interested in baseball; I wouldn't have gotten further in the *Kreis*. Everybody was guilty of not being the full ticket. Harold Dull, however, I think went deep into Spicer's work and drew on it very fully—and he was never of the *Kreis*." Though I asked Duncan why, he delayed his answer.

"George was! When Jack said, 'you aren't my friend'"—here Duncan referred to my interview with George Stanley which Duncan had seen in transcript—"that still doesn't let Jack—" and Duncan broke off his thought. "I think it was essential to be homosexual in the *Kreis*. Because it's just poetry in Jack's mind, and certain ideas of witchly powers." Duncan had hesitated in these reflections, sometimes including someone and excluding another—Jim Herndon, for example, whom Duncan recognized Jack Spicer respected as talented, but not in the sense required for "the *Kreis*." We then came upon the poet, Landis Everson, who had had a promising beginning as published poet with national literary reviews in the Berkeley student years in

the late 1940s, and who had remained a friend of Spicer's and Blaser's into later years. Duncan continued, "and the fruitless pursuit of Landis, who was just an elegant writer for *Kenyon Review* or something, to try to make him be real, but he was never real from the beginning."

I asked, "because Landis is homosexual, pretty—" I was trying to fit him into Duncan's version of the homosexual *Kreis*—squared—of magic powers.

"That was it," Duncan went on. "Landis had to be the missing—he had to be in that *Kreis*. You would have thought they would have given up in the first couple of years." Here Duncan referred to Spicer's and Blaser's continuing interest in Landis Everson as poet, reflected by his presence in a small group that began meeting in 1960 when Blaser returned from Boston. Robert remembered, "He had poems printed in that Berkeley period that were just borderline, but they were as pretty as Robin was writing at that time. He didn't have the courage to write with 100%"—the noun becomes inaudible in Duncan's hurried thought—"and gradually you discover, 'no! you can't qualify by being homosexual and writing, and of having the talent for poetry.'"

"What more is needed?"

"I think what Spicer was looking for," Duncan responded, "was a poetic fate, and interestingly enough, he saw true addiction to baseball as a fate, and the end product of that—this *Kreis*—is a design for fate."

I introduced comparison of the circle of Stephane Mallarmé and of Stefan George. To this Duncan commented, "Mallarmé's circle didn't interest Jack. But was it a circle? It was a *salon*. Remember, George's was not a *salon*, and Mallarmé's was not a circle. The circle was what Jack wanted, and he hated the *salon*."

"The square," I remarked.

"The square, right: the circle in the square," Duncan concluded.

When discussing the role of homosexuality in Spicer's conceptions, Robert Duncan thought to say something like what has been stated at times in these pages from Jim Herndon and from Graham Mackintosh. "Jack liked to play the scorn possible, but [it was] only in the definition of the *Kreis*—to reiterate it—[that] I ever thought the gay thing was important. When it came to writing, and the reality of a person, and the recognition of a person was close to it, Jack had no trouble recognizing that Herndon was close to him and that he was close to Herndon. So he didn't think in terms of straight and gay. He could only despise gays who presumed that that was some kind of reality."

Again, speaking on similar topics, Duncan said, "The reason that the question of 'gay' didn't come up [as special in Spicer's routine thought] is that this *Kreis* that Spicer was forming was a magic circle, so the gays outside didn't signify. But clearly Jack kept gay company. His bridge club

was not a part of his *Kreis*. A bridge table is an interesting table, he saw bridge as a magic game, he thought of bridge as a trap—and the players were gay. But if we got to the baseball games, the players aren't gay."

Duncan returned to this subject finally with "sexuality is so charged with magic I think all Jack's life he could only conceive of it as an operated magic that brought one into this trap—the trap of love."

The coherence of Robert Duncan's remarks here is intuitive, drawing from a framework of memory orchestrating feelings about this man whose life and work, by Duncan's own frequent admission, were so important to him. "I experienced an essentiality or a reality in Spicer's work, as I did in Olson's, that I really didn't find elsewhere among my peers."[12]

Robin Blaser & Friend, collage by Robert Berg; published in *Open Space*, No. 6 (June 1964)

"The King's Two Bodies"

*

I hear a banging on the door of the night
Buzz, buzz; buzz, buzz; buzz, buzz
If you open the door does it let in light?
Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz; buzz, buzzz

If the day appears like a yellow raft
Meow, meow; meow, meoww
Is it really on top of a yellow giraffe
Meow, meow, meow, meow. Meow, meow

If the door caves in as the darkness slides
Knocking and knocking; knock, knock, knock
What can tell the light of whatever's inside?
Knocking and knocking; knock, knock, knock

Or the light and the darkness dance in your eye
Shadows falling one by one
Pigs, and eels, and open sky
Dancers falling one by one
Dancers shrieking one by one.
(Jack Spicer, "Thing Language" in *Language*)

When Jack Spicer wrote the "Buzz" poem just given, one cannot know, of course, what happened to him as man and poet to make this work. Emily Dickinson is echoed, in fact is celebrated as the poem repeats her voice of wonder when writing (*hearing* must be the correct word here) "I heard a fly buzz when I died" almost a century before.[1] One may be curious too, as I was, when I encountered a remark in an essay by Clayton Eshleman on Jack Spicer's work as translator in *After Lorca* about "a voice" of alcohol. Eshleman says he recognizes "a dull metallic feel to quite a bit of [Spicer's] writing that appears to me to be the darker side of drunk writing—the more useful side being the chance ability to make irrational things correspond in distortion."[2] A poem such as "Buzz" may be from such a world (with or without "a dull metallic feel"). Ron Primack mentioned that Spicer often had visitors knocking at his door at night, that Jack neither knew whom they were nor investigated whom they might be. A setting for a poem. However that may be, the Dickinson connection was recognized at the time Jack first produced the poem. "Buzz" made a considerable impression when it was published (*Open Space* #2), so that when, a few months later, Paul Alexander, Larry Fagin and Bill Brodecky decided to open a gallery in a

Victorian apartment next to that once occupied by Ebbe Borregaard's Museum on Buchanan Street in Japan Town, they called the gallery "Buzz."

"I wanted a name that suggested activity, but with no pretentious aspect," Paul Alexander wrote me concerning the naming of the gallery. "George [Stanley] came up with *Buzz*." Reflecting that the Spicer connection with the name had faded in his memory, Paul Alexander continued, "Jack used it as a harbinger of death. I liked it [the name] so much I decided it was such a common word it could hardly have only one association in people's minds. My next problem was convincing Brodecky and Fagin, but they were easy. Almost everyone had a first reaction of distaste to it."

"[Buzz] was very seriously seen by the painters and took all my diplomacy to keep it from being a scene of warfare. The poets, of course (except Robin [Blaser] and [Robert] Duncan) saw its function as an amusement, that is until we had a poets' show, of which I still receive criticism because we also included the painters. That show I must admit I took lightly; not so such events as Helen Adam's photo portraits (in a regular show)." All this information, especially the assessment of the seriousness of purpose of this project—like The Peacock Gallery before it, in 1963—has been confirmed for me by Bill Brodecky.[3]

In a lighter sense "buzz" flavored the social life of the winter and spring of this new-magazine year. As illustrated in *Open Space* (#4-Taurus) by Tom Field in a drawing of "McNeill's party," parties were the tone of the social experience of the day. For many consciousness was a continuous party with a few hours or a day taken away from this busy life to concentrate enough for work in art (or something else). Or so the days seemed, though in fact the intensity of daily living was high, and the making of a poem, a drawing, or more difficult and ambitious projects perhaps was but the moment taken to record what in fact was happening to these people interacting or in currents deeper than (and blind to) these apparent events.

I celebrated my thirty-first birthday at Stinson Beach with a party. The weekend group was present at its usual fullness, the days fine if cool. The solarium was set for a large evening dinner of mussels (steamed in trays on top the stove, in white wine) with melted garlic butter and French bread accompanying, a staple of the time. The guests went to nearby Bolinas, where on Duxbury Reef and Agate Beach these deep purple, finger-length nacreous shells which open to orange flesh in beds were gathered in very ample numbers for repasts of huge size. On this occasion I remember Helen Adam reciting from memory, in her wonderful way of song and incantation, the poem given in Don Allen's *New American Poetry*, "I Love My Love."[4] Anyone who has ever heard this superb reader perform may yet appreciate (as I do still in memory, after twenty years and more) the sinister stage-whisper

of the refrain as she approaches the poem's end: "In through the keyhole, elvish bright, came creeping a single hair. / Softly, softly, it stroked his lips, on his eyelids traced a sign. / 'I love my love with a capital Z. I mark him Zero and mine. / Ha! Ha! / I mark him Zero and mine.' / The hair rushed in. He struggled and tore...." Candles flickered on the bunched picnic tables brought together and covered with a bedsheet (or so) to accommodate the assembled diners/listeners. Such meals, with the readings that followed, extended well into the evening, when people then would disperse to walk under the stars, to drink by the fire, to sleep. Jack Spicer posted a poem from a thumb tack by the window dividing the solarium and living room of the Drew House for this occasion.

The log in the fire
Asks a lot
When it is lighted
Or knot

Timber comes
From seas mainly
Sometimes burns green
-Ly

When it is lighted
The knot
Burns like a joke
With the color of smoke

Save us, with birthdays, whatever is in the
fire or not in the fire, immortal
We cannot be
A chimney tree
Or give grace to what's mere-
Ly fatal.[5]

My birthday party occurred in late February, the poem appeared in the March issue of *Open Space* (#3), but the season of birthdays was just begun. In May Paul Alexander's (slightly belated) and Robin Blaser's (both Taurians) contained the opportunity for a grand gathering at Stinson Beach. This party George Stanley decided to call DOPS (in announcements of it)—*Dops Tauri Diana Absenta*, the "dops" of which I have forgotten the meaning (George Stanley's Latin education supplied such terms) though the "absent Diana" recalls "no moon." Paul Alexander became 33 and Robin Blaser 39.

Again the solarium (sunless since covered with bougainvillea on the outside) was brought into service. This time the bedsheet-draped tables supported a buffet. No expense was spared—the wine bought in North Beach cost the next month's rent at the cottage, which caused me to leave the place thereby—but art, society and the occasion were served. I was soon to exchange the Drew House with Harold Dull and Ila Hinton for her Telegraph Hill apartment at 16 Edith Street, another wonderful enclave *à la* North Beach. And from his residence at the Drew House came Harold Dull's *The Star Year*. It seemed that each move played its part in the making of a larger work as a whole, the project these several people had set about to do in art. Now, for Paul's and Robin's birthday, the concern was only the consumption of vats (equivalencies) of California champagne, foods to eat and a delicious springtime at the oceanside to savor. The occasion was pagan. The Belle of Portugal rose, closed when Stan Persky presented his first copies of *Open Space* to its author-audience January 1, 1964, now opened in new buds. I recall this splendor while gardening and observing Robin Blaser reading on the deck to which the rose climbed. By him was a plate glass window across which we had strung a grid of hefty threads with baubles pendant to prevent recurrence of an accident that had happened earlier in the morning, a bird stunned by flying against the pane, potential breakfast for Paul's cat, Albert Pinkham Ryder. From this deck one could scan the ocean over the housetops of the village. Soon to come was the evening's joint-birthday party. With lemons and flowers from the garden I supported Bill Brodecky's table decorations, masses of white candles clumped on driftwood bases.

Drawing from his diary, Robert Berg—one of the party's guests—quoted me his entry for the day. "Jim Powers [a young friend of Berg's who later entered North Beach life briefly until killed in his car less than a year later] and I arrived at [the] Stinson Beach party at 3 P.M., Monday, May 18, 1964. The occasion was Robin Blaser's 39th birthday and a late birthday party for Paul Alexander. Robin and Stan Persky climbed over the hill [Mr. Tamalpais]. Jim and I hitchhiked and were picked up by Harold Dull and Ila Hinton. Bill Brodecky and George Stanley were in the back seat. George insisted on singing Beatles' songs ('Can't Buy Me Love,' 'Love Me Do,' 'She Loves Me.')." The afternoon stretched into an evening and tomorrow where people slept in houses of friends of the group as well as the Drew cottage. Barbara Ghilotti and Tyler Andersen carried a large part of the physical and social burden of these large events. A parade of persons with glasses in hand day or night signaled the connections of the community to its varied centers, the glitter of ocean or splash of stars equally forbearing.

Huge social events were the center of concern only for some of those involved with the community of North Beach poets and painters that, loosely, assembled along Green Street in its bars. Other bonds linked those

who felt themselves specially locked into the experience of Jack Spicer's personality and work. If today I see Robin Blaser enjoying the sunshine of an open porch in Stinson Beach at 39, his life in San Francisco less than three years away to end in favor of university teaching in Vancouver, British Columbia, I realize that we all were together only fragilely and by chance as persons and artists at this time, though the experience then seemed immutably solid. I doubt that in 1964 many of those around Spicer, even his close personal friends and colleagues in poetry, really could have put fingers precisely on what joined everyone—or even a few—of these people outside social happenstance and the chances of random meeting. While talking with Robin Blaser almost two dacades later, when we were trying to look closely at what we were—and especially what Jack Spicer was—doing really at this time, our conversation explored.[6]

Blaser and I had been talking about points where Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer met as artists, and divided, as a central place to observe the organism of work and life that I have chosen to call "the Spicer circle." Blaser was saying, "If you look at that lovely essay of Duncan's in *The New American Poetry* where he argues about the traditionalist; if you look at the *Chimères* essay—in *Audit* magazine—there indeed you get that sense of how marvelously Duncan sits, how comfortably and magnificently he sits within a sense of language as being back behind you.[7] Whereas on the other hand you get this increased textuality in Spicer; it comes out in his study of linguistics. The text is there and it can sometimes be sick as sick can be. It can be like cubist painting where you can't get through the fucking frame. There isn't a vision; there's no way. There's a total materialization of language." Blaser here gave an example of what he meant in Spicer's work, the first line in "Love Poems" #6 in *Language*: "Sable arrested a fine comb."[8] Robin continued, "So I'm trying to say that I think what's involved here is very fundamental opposition that has everything to do with time/space in your poems."

In attempting to grasp what Blaser was saying I remarked—rather as a question—"If Duncan sees language behind him as his reinforcement, and Spicer language in front of him as his possibility, it's like science fiction in a way. I assume, now, that for Jack there's *no* form behind him, that he's giving form to the formless?"

"Well, Duncan is continuous," Robin Blaser replied, "a continuous voice in poetry; where Spicer has to do with direction, with a break. Language doesn't do what it should do. Language doesn't appear to be God's voice at all. If it is, then it requires a tension of opposition, of difference, of outside and inside, so that one recognizes again a form; the forms are very broken. They can be very fragmented—"

I interrupted, "They are perhaps even truer if they are?"

"I suppose," Blaser thought, "it would depend on what side you were taking. It seems to me that Spicer's work has taken upon itself magnificently the actual, what do you want to call it? the crisis of meaning? condition of disbelief? All the stuff, you know, as if the end of things, the death of God—they just go on endlessly."

"Right," I agreed.

"It seems to me that Spicer, with a greater sophistication than anybody—I mean, you don't sit around worrying about the death of God if the word 'God' has somehow fallen into the street, all the contents are loose and running about! in the gutters! Crisis is present and the transcendent, as such, is very, very much in question."

To which I said, rather desperately, "*What can be done?*"

Robin answered, "Well, the overwhelming. And the marvelous. And so forth. An entire return to the sacred. But *without* a traditional order in order to save oneself from it."

When I hesitated in the conversation, Blaser went on to say, "You know those lines that Spicer so liked from [Rilke's] 'The First Duino Elegy,' '*Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?*' Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?' I put that in the back of *The Collected Books [of Jack Spicer]* because they're such major poems, *The Duino Elegies*. There, that whole sense of being crushed by the angel; the overwhelming nature of it, so that you get a differently poised vision. You get one that has to work with the end of something at the same time; then, you're trying to shape it again."

To this I asked Blaser, "You don't feel Duncan feels that imposed upon by the crushing angel?"

"I don't think he does," Robin answered. "No. Though he certainly has awe, and beauty, at its most terrifying, in his poems."

For no particular reason I changed the subject at this point in our talk, asking Robin about Jack Spicer's once declared intention of writing a detective story—a full-length work—in the late 1950s. One chapter of this novel has been published in a now hard-to-find journal of 1970.[9]

"The detective novel: Jack's writing that in '57 or '58," Blaser said to me.

"I noticed The Place is being described," I mentioned. The setting of the published chapter is in this favorite Spicer bar of the day.

"There are two chapters," Robin continued. "The second of them is incomplete. It's wonderful. Spicer read detective stories his entire life. Even there at the end, when he's not reading much, he still would be reading detective stories."

"Were they Dashiell Hammett/Raymond Chandler school?"

"He read those," Robin went on, "but he read everything. There was a bookstore on the corner at the north side of campus [U.C. Berkeley] where

they had a detective story collection. They kept track of those that you'd read—you got to mark your initials—and Spicer would just read one after another. He would read almost anything . . . in detective stories. He also did the same thing with science fiction for a long time. He used to say, 'Well, William Butler Yeats, that's the way he relaxed. He read detective stories.' Which is true. So Spicer read them all his life. Now when he got to the '57/'58 period—when he's trying to write a detective story—on one level it was that he really wanted to try to live on his writing. What writer doesn't? And what writer manages to do it these days? Not many. So he cooked up the notion that he would do a detective story and that would give him a kind of ground. It would both protect the poetry—leave it free—and then he could have this wonderful time with something he loved anyway, the detective story. So he worked at it, and of course as you read it, it really is a part of his work, and as splendid as that is. It would have had the same difficulty for a wide audience as his poetry had at the time."

"It may," I guardedly remarked.

"It would have depended on how he managed all that. It's very North Beach."

"It's the best description of The Place I've yet encountered," I commented.

"And you remember he was editing—in '59—the magazine *J*."

I agreed, "Yes, this is a very active period for him."

"Very," Robin confirmed. "The poetry simply drew him away from the prose length. This wasn't the first time that Jack tried a novel. There are bits and pieces of one he planned to do when he was wandering around Big Sur, way back in '46 or '47. He liked novels. He read novels. But he never saw himself as a novelist. I think the detective story would have become as complex finally for all the original plan of its being a kind of scam—it would have become as complicated as the 'Textbook of Poetry.'"

I replied, "I wouldn't be surprised if he sensed that and gave it up for that reason."

"He uses that detective story in *The Holy Grail*," Blaser suggested, "which I identified." Without further explanation, Robin continued, "We could go on a long time about detecting, the business of mystery, all that."

The conversation abruptly turned to Jack Spicer and homosexuality. "I think one can make too great a point of the tie of Spicer, Duncan, and Blaser because we were homosexual. OK, sure, that was there. But it was a very, very wide group. When events came up, you had a core of forty people or so, of whom few were homosexual—some were interchangable."

"Forty people? your Berkeley life?"

Robin confirmed this, saying, "The literary—so it was very wide. The homosexual took its place as being your reality. I very much object to separating the homosexual poetry out as though somehow it lacked an

information that a heterosexual poetry had. That's just sheer nonsense." After saying the only difference between pairings in such poetry is that the partners are the same sex, Blaser continued, "I'm terribly uneasy at the sense of setting the homosexual apart, as though it were some kind of specialization. I not only do not believe it, but I think the two-fold vision remains the same for all of us, with the great variety that lets us go on writing love poems for the rest of our lives, and struggling to get a little bit beyond the two-fold vision, just one's self and one's attraction." Robin Blaser's view of the role of homosexuality in poetry and in Jack Spicer's vocation, begun in what has just been said and developed somewhat in observations to follow, compares interestingly to Robert Duncan's view of this subject given by him at the conclusion of "The Outlands" above, where sex as magic, and a homosexual circle ("the *Kreis*") as a magic circle, are discussed.

I remarked to Blaser that I noticed that Robert Duncan, in his Preface to the mostly early, always single poems of Jack Spicer edited by Don Allen in *One Night Stand and Other Poems* attempted to establish a relation between guilt, homosexuality and drinking in Spicer's life. Not arguing then or later what Duncan's view actually may be along these lines, Blaser said only, "I'm hardly going to explain drinking—and alcoholism—by the guilt of homosexuality." When I hesitated in my response, Blaser went on, "It's there; it's the sexual that would explain it. I don't think Spicer spent much of his energy on the *guilt* of it. He certainly knew the despair of relationship and wrote most terrifyingly of it."

I then tried to separate meanings, wondering whether a sexual object was "intrinsically unable to deliver what Spicer wanted" or that "Jack liked younger people, or didn't like himself," to arrive at some kind of resolve, or general understanding about the fearsome negations of Jack Spicer's front to the world in life and art so regularly. "What is the occasion of the despair and the terror?" I asked Robin.

"From the earliest years Spicer saw himself as quite ugly." Thus Blaser, as others have also pointed out. "He had certain physical disabilities which, it seems to me," Blaser continued, "he got under control in later years, certainly better than when I first met him. He had an almost spastic characteristic. When I first met him, he saw himself as unattractive and he dramatized that and played it out. When I first met him, he was wearing a trench coat, dark glasses, had on sandals, and his feet were purple for athlete's foot."

Blaser expanded these biographical notes a bit, remarking, "Jack was reading Buddhism at that point. He carried an umbrella as well. He was an astonishing figure, and he dramatized it. I can remember many, many instances when he was uneasy with—when he got his teaching assistanceship, for example, he needed a suit. It took I don't know how

many fittings and the suit never did fit." Chuckling, Robin Blaser reminisced, "I'll never forget, he would drag me there [to the tailor] and we'd go through it all over again. The very peculiar unease of himself. The way he saw himself as 'the dancing ape' of the early poems."

How often, I recalled, this image reappears to those who knew Spicer from his youth, his Berkeley days. As this paragraph was being written, a stranger to me, Mary Rice Moore, telephoned to say she had been a close friend of Jack Spicer beginning with the exile days Jack spent in Minnesota (1950-52) and continuing together at Berkeley when they both came there from the Midwest. She told me, "I loved him. We met in Minnesota, lived in the same building for a year and a half, were always together. Saturday nights we went to Herb's, a gay bar where we'd have a beer (or more if somebody bought him one). I didn't know he was gay for a long time until a friend mentioned it in the student cafeteria when we were together. He was upset, very. I was just new from Montana, naive. I didn't know men even did such things, or women. We returned to Berkeley—as a pair—visiting a gay friend in Nebraska. We drove across the West, planning to share a house together. I had been a student in his Old English class he T.A.ed [taught as a teaching assistant] at the University of Minnesota. He taught for $120 a month so I never really knew if he was just cheap or didn't have enough money when we went out. When we got back, I saw the gay thing was going to be overhwelming. I didn't want to be a 'fag hag,' and so I started to date someone else. Even then, the three of us went out to the White Horse bar on Telegraph Avenue almost every night. Jack was jealous but I didn't know it. I only learned that when I was putting the pieces together in psychotherapy and asked the guy I'd been dating then with Jack. He said, 'Of course.' He [Jack] was disappointed when I said we couldn't live together. He had told everyone we were steady. There had never been any sex, not because I didn't want any—I had the strongest sexual feelings I've ever had around him—I loved him. I was terribly attracted. But then it came down to 'the dancing ape' thing," and here the conversation returned to this image as one she remembered both from their friendship so closely lived out together in the early 1950s and from two meetings they had at Gino & Carlo's bar shortly before Spicer's death. "I thought he was just fat. 'We'll have to do something about that!' I thought, being a possessive lady and still so unaware of his alcoholism or anything. It was to be 'the dancing ape' to the end. That was the poetry I remembered. I didn't understand the later poetry. I didn't like it really."[11] This point of view and its echoes reverberate through the conversations I have had with the people who knew Spicer as a student and early practitioner of his art, who were friends before "the Books" (1956).

Robin Blaser also knew Jack Spicer in the contexts of graduate school and teaching assistantships. These contexts tucked into the attitudes

prevailing concerning sexuality among this group of friends. "Jack's first teaching assistantship was for Tom Parkinson in the English Department. His first lecture was on Mary Butts's *Armed with Madness*, that splendid novel about a modern relationship to the grail." This author has remained a Blaser and Duncan favorite to the present day. In the spring of 1984 both poets participated in a symposium concerning her at the University of California at Davis. Robin, however, wished to say more to me about homosexuality and poetry, reflecting both present and past views on these subjects. "I'm *not* going to let the homosexual—the whole fucking thing [go] into prejudice—that you take the homosexual and set it apart as though it were an anguish different from any other anguish. It isn't true. The difficulty of human relationship is so profound, and so basic, that most of the love poetry turns out to be poetry of anguish. Now, the homosexual falls into that like everything else. As far as Spicer was concerned, Jack saw himself always as singularly alone, singularly ugly, and unwanted.

"He wouldn't be alone in that, I suppose, but then in that came that long history of the love of young men, in which he was both teacher and lover. We have the letters to Allen Joyce, that Italian young man [Gary Bottone] to whom he wrote many letters. We have Graham Mackintosh among these."[12] Blaser then went on to the public stance of the poets of this group in Berkeley, the Renaissance of the 1940s, and mentioned Robert Duncan's celebrated—more accurately, notorious—open declaration of his homosexuality in print in Dwight MacDonald's magazine, *Politics* (August 1944), which earned Duncan the rejection by John Crowe Ransom, editor and poet, of an already accepted poem for Ransom's poetry journal, *The Kenyon Review*.[13] After saying that both Spicer and he were "fascinated with the piece" by Duncan, that they found it "astonishing and marvelous," Blaser described Spicer's undergraduate involvements with anarchists, Trotskyites and other (almost any) radical groups at Berkeley. He went on to mention Spicer's membership in an organization started in Los Angeles (1950+) very early promoting homosexual rights, the Mattachine Society, and its publication, *One* magazine. A countercultural development of the McCarthy/Truman/Eisenhower era in urging wider and more open social forms in American life, Blaser remarked that the Mattachine Society's meetings were "strikingly like present-day group therapy." There are amusing accounts of these radical and group concerns on Spicer's part, with some of the political connections discussed by Jim Herndon in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* in an endpaper.[14] Stories accumulate—and probably distort over the years too—of Jack's attending a Mattachine Society convention in Los Angeles where his presence was disruptive if well-meant at such affairs. One hesitates to emphasize disruptiveness in Spicer's conduct public and private, which erupted in its way like his love of games, puns and other forms of play in his use of language and his

behavior anywhere. Disruptiveness was for him sport, an extension of the boyish which he treasured personally and in others; it was less often intended to harm or destroy.

Blaser summarized his recollection of Spicer's association with the Mettachine Society by saying, "Jack really did a great deal with that group. Attending meetings, organizing them and so on—for well over a year. He took an activist position in it. As far as I know, he never hid that aspect of himself," referring to Spicer's homosexuality. Robin and I then recalled one poem, written in connection with Jack Spicer's close relation to Kate Mulholland in the late 1940s, "Psychoanalysis: An Elegy," and reproduced in the edition of single poems, *One Night Stand and Other Poems*. In this poem "disguise" might be recognized in view of an explicit heterosexual allusion, "send me some penny picture-postcards, lady, / Send them. / One of each breast photographed looking / Like curious national monuments ...," sustained emphatically if not comfortably to a clear impression of the author's heterosexual self-revelations.[15] But one remembers, too, that Jack Spicer at the time this poem was written was in fact attempting just such an adventure in heterosexuality, however successful or not it may have later come to be regarded.

At this point Robin Blaser repeated, and underscored his own perspective revealing the growth of poetic skills—a perspective likely shared with Jack Spicer, I suspect. "I'm uncomfortable in reading the sexual dynamic—whatever form it takes, and with all its splendid variation—and I'm saying that I think that really is the opener of two-fold vision. One then begins the incredibly difficult work of going *beyond* two-fold vision."

I suggested, "An integration of some kind?"

Robin answered, "Well, you can try for integration. But certainly get ahold of the world—" At which suggestion I introduced the idea of Jack Spicer's "Calvinism," alleged or actual. This matter has been extensively discussed by Blaser in the endpapers of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* and by Duncan in the Preface to *One Night Stand*, yet I believe it should appear here as it did in my conversation with Robin Blaser, in terms in which it was an outgrowth of what already had been said between us.

"By 1965 the issue [of Calvinism in American letters] had been posed in the wrong terms. One is no longer within the Calvinist-Puritan tradition at all. One is now caught in the entire wreckage of whatever that tradition was. I thought that [any question concerning Spicer's relation to Calvinism in literature] was posed in such a way that there was not an answer to it.

"We do know that Spicer had mixed Methodist/Presbyterian background in his youth. He took theology seriously. Every one of us [Duncan and Blaser]: Spicer was one who had read a very considerable amount, not only of Calvin—*The Institutes*—but he had read very carefully in Luther, because he enjoyed Luther's language and, you know, Jack had rather good German.

One of the first exciting courses we took—Robert didn't take this—was Hawthorne. Hawthorne and Melville. Where we get right into this again. Because Melville's magnificent subject is, really, the breakdown of [the Calvinist tradition]. It's being in the midst of this, without being able to let it go, and at the same time—you need interrogators; Spicer was an interrogator, rather than an asserter.

"So theology was extremely important. All of us took a great deal of interest in it, not only because we were interested in the beginnings of American literature, but because we did have ties to earlier American literature. Then of course a lot of material we were taking [at the University of California, Berkeley] came out of theology. All of the stuff with Kantorowicz, where we did the Byzanthinology course, had to do with the nature of theology and its difference from the theology of the West. The stuff in *The King's Two Bodies* [Ernst Kantorowicz's final major book, the research for which served as his lecture material for the Berkeley Renaissance poets] is fundamentally involved in theological structures, translated, then, into active forms in the world.

"In addition to that, we had other courses from Kantorowicz. One was in Byzantinology and then that had an extension into a graduate course—Spicer and Duncan took it, and it was our last text, called 'Constantine Porphyogenitus'—and its subject was, 'How to Approach the Byzantine Emperor.'"

"Ritually, you mean?"

"Ritually, yes." Robin Blaser warmed to his topic.

"So the three poets—to this day, it seems to me—have a common interest in ritual, in theology," Robin continued, "which, I suppose, should be differentiated from things like theogony. All that is very, very important. Spicer is so American that he is going to be interested in the Calvinist thing."

"He was an absolute expert on Hawthorne, you know. The first thing he did when he took his first playwriting course at Berkeley was to write a version of "Young Goodman Brown"—which unfortunately I haven't been able to find a complete text of—but it was certainly memorable."

Ernst Kantorowicz's (professor of medieval history and philosophy at Berkeley) role in the lives of Blaser, Spicer and Duncan was large. He was a distinguished teacher at the University while the three young men were undergraduates. They took his courses in graduate departments, for credit or not, to the time they were themselves in graduate work. He came in direct line from the celebrated *Kreis* of Stefan George in Germany, the circle of largely homosexual artists, teachers, craftsmen (in the sense England knew such an experience with William Morris) where high standards of scholarship, of ability and performance were exalted and effectively encouraged among its members by both George, and by those he worked

closely with, among them Friederich Gundolf, Kantorowicz's teacher. In 1933 George died, and soon after Kantorowicz left Germany (he was Jewish, as well as of the Polish aristocracy). This experience in turn alerted him to oppression from political sources. When the University Regents in 1950 required professors (and staff) to sign a loyalty oath to the Constitution with specific anti-Communist provisions (though the *George Kreis* was anything but Communist), Kantorowicz refused to sign and left the University to go to Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. Spicer too had left the University for this reason in 1950, going to the University of Minnesota, after just having taken his Master's degree in English at Berkeley. So the bonds were several with Kantorowicz, and to him may be traced a special context of idealism behind the notion of "the Berkeley Renaissance."

Robin Blaser discussed more of the background Duncan, Spicer and he shared. "Kantorowicz was of enormous importance to all three of us. It seems to me that—as I would express it from my own point of view—Kantorowicz gave me history. An ability to think historically. An ability to know how large the world was. I had some of that from Catholicism; Duncan from Theosophy; Spicer had some of that from Calvinism and the depths of the American. That is to say, if you are interested in how old we are, and how complicated and how hard the labor of all this is, Kantorowicz brought it all to a head and opened into the most extraordinary information. Which was then searched out. So that, coming out of that, we have Duncan's *Medieval Scenes* and, of course, *The Venice Poem*," two early books/poems. "Kantorowicz was fundamental in working against that American thing that works ahistorically and pretends that there isn't really anything but a kind of progression. Kantorowicz is a reversal in many ways."

Here conversation turned to religion and magic. Blaser said, introducing his ideas on these, that "I think religion is a permanent characteristic of human nature. And—when you put it abstractly—its fundamental aspect is the way you are bound to the world. I would argue that being bound to the world is always very large indeed. It's the stars and the sky and so on, and it plays itself out in poetic language over and over again, whether you're attached to one, to any system or not.

"It seems to me that magic is, again—to do it abstractly, in order to get through it fast—that frequently magic's means is by way of language; in fact, always by language. That it is an active relationship to the Outside. Magic is a way of constantly redefining and keeping alive the subject/object relationship. It can be quite dangerous."

"What are its parameters?" I questioned.

"It has no parameters," Robin replied. "Because it insists that whatever is going on is alive and doesn't fall into definition, doesn't fall into

completion, but is most frequently incomplete and a system in which one is always tied to the largeness, to the awe of, to the incomprehensibility of. Language is the instrument by which you play the notes of Inside and Outside."

I interposed, incredulous really, "There would be other vehicles, of course."

"There isn't any other vehicle. No: I mean," Blaser explained, "language—arts, you've got music. You are going to have sound, and you are going to have symbol; you can have painting, and architecture, and sculpture, and music and dance—all of which are language.

"It just happens the three people you're talking about all are after words-as-such. And words complicate because words both determine and make indeterminate."

Interested in this assertion, I remarked, "How about the Romantic implications of that? I recently came across a title of Philip K. Dick, the science fiction writer, called *A Crack in Space* and I thought how really terribly exciting that title is, what it's all about in a way—"

"It's what it's all about," Blaser broke in, catching my excitement, "and it's also very theosophical. In Duncan's *Adam's Way*, for example, he used the term 'interstices.' So at one point Helen Adam and I are going down on our hands up against an invisible wall. There are voices on the other side of the wall that we can barely hear, and not hear clearly." Blaser's part in this production of Duncan's play was central, that of Hermes. I introduced a notion of the influence of Jean Cocteau's film (and earlier play), *Orphée*, on Spicer's work at this point, specifically its part in *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether*. Blaser immediately connected this idea to the one just discussed. "That would come close—there you've got the curious thing about the invisible being attached to the realm of death. You need not identify the invisible with death, but certainly it seems to me rather fundamental that whatever one wants to say the invisible is, you're going to deal with the nature of death in it. In philosophical terms the invisible can be taken as simply that on which everything is founded. That all visibility is founded upon the invisible."

Citing here an astrophysicist whose name I missed, Robin Blaser quoted, "'In the great flow of the universe—meaning both its chemistry and its physics—it's just a hang-up that we get to see the constellations at all.' Well, it hardly takes much of a move to say that the human body, as we look at one another, is simply a hang-up in the vast flow to which we belong. We are these momentary visibilities within that vast invisible thing.

"We get very confused in modern thought, with somebody like Foucault arguing that our sense of invisibility now has to do with three great ranges, taken out of the movement of modern thought, as it becomes a

vast kind of materialization. He calls them Labour, Life and Language. So that you've got Labor as that vast economic system, which is invisible, and maybe centuries old in the form in which it takes—we have to articulate our way into making a living. You've got Life, its vast invisible form, of which we're a visible moment. And Language—as Foucault would point out—it's both *older* than we are, and always *other* than we are. Now right there, it seems to me, you will not get any disagreement among the three people [Duncan, Spicer, Blaser] whatever."

"The 'older' and 'other' aspects of it?"

"The *older* and *other*. Robert knows it magnificently; Spicer knew it with a kind of terror at times. Spicer marvelously set it up so that we would build the Outside again, that we wouldn't let it all fall into psyche, and into subject.

"That becomes very dangerous business. The invisible—"

"Dangerous?" I wondered. "In what way?"

"You're very much endangered when you give yourself over entirely to working the vastness. With that marvelous passage I so like to quote of Victor Hugo's, 'every man has his Patmos' [St. John's place of exile]. It's just as well in response to this to remain in *ordinary* thought, in *ordinary* consciousness, in *ordinary* feelings, because otherwise you go to the edge. And there, the ways of the marvelous meet you. As Hugo says in that great passage, 'forever you are somehow touched with the dark.'[16]

"Robert Duncan was touched by the dark as much as Spicer is, in many, many ways. And certainly I am touched by the dark. It is a part of the spiritual discipline of what it is to be a poet. Not all poets take poetry to be a spiritual discipline. I'm taking Spicer's own description of it: invisibility is then filled with a vast vocabulary that is, that can be ancient, and then of course is also modern. Because we have to be in our own time as well as being as old as what we are. Then, at that point, *in* comes that vast vocabulary of the invisible, which can be gnostic—if that's the way you've been working—which can be Biblical—that has to do with the vocabulary of the invisible which then, as it edges toward visibilities, tends to tell marvelous stories. And the vocabulary of it, it seems to me, is on the whole, permanent.

"It makes myth fundamental."

I responded, "So we're really dealing with a modern concern of *edges?*"" "Yes, of edges," Blaser affirmed. "You can use a vocabulary of spooks, which I thought Jack did so wonderfully—"

"In low-ghost and—" I offered.

"Blake would use 'the shadows' and 'spectres,'" Robin suggested.

I added, "But isn't that much more Romantically grounded than what you're talking about? With Spicer, which seems to me to have a grounding

in physics—" Clearly here, by saying "which," I am thinking of Spicer as "a work," as literature.

Blaser moved into this with, "Well, I think that Spicer had a strong anti-Romantic side. Which is to say—I hate being so simple about this, because I would want to extend all of these, and not get myself into quarrels because I haven't been able to complete my thought—" Robin had remembered that we were on the long-distance telephone, recording; time was passing at length.

"Right."

"Which is to say that the visionary for Jack is in trouble. The Romantic repeatedly has the visionary possibility. And the visionary possibility is not God, for Spicer; but it is interrogated over and over again. Then one moves to the vastness of the sea, in Spicer—the seagull—"

"He uses the sea a lot, sea, seagull, all those things. The implication being—that they're so large? that they're so black-and-white, I suppose: what would you say?" Testing, I felt the moment special.

"No, because that's dualism," Blaser answered me. "I'm very glad you did that! That's the trouble! Calvinism supposes over and over again a dualism. Calvinism, and even the greater part of Luther does the same thing—and I did research this carefully—this is to argue the absolute otherness of God. Which is to say, the absolute otherness of complete meaning, of absolute meaning. It divides the world in such a way that you have a dualism: a godhead, the created world, separate from Him—OK?

"Now, one may trace this throughout Jack: he was fascinated by it. He knew a lot about it. He is, essentially, quarreling with it. In order to find *not* dualism, finally—though he kept, it's true, feeling the world as dualistic in some way—but he so modernizes it that it becomes modern condition rather than Calvinistic condition. And then the search is to find the way in which we are dealing with—what? with contraries, with opposites; not, simply, with dualism.

"Spicer's blasphemy, in fact, is directed against that thought which would protest the purity of God."[17]

NOTES

"THE OUTLANDS":

1. James Felts was Robin Blaser's companion for seventeen years, from the mid–1940s as students in Berkeley to the mid–1960s in San Francisco.

2. Robert Duncan and Jess Collins lived in a cottage, the Drew House, at Stinson Beach, thirty miles north of San Francisco, from March 1958 to March 1961.

3. *The Venice Poem*, by Robert Duncan, variously was published in small editions from a version in *Berkeley Miscellany* in the late 1940s to its present, final version by Prism Press in Sydney, Australia, in 1975. From the 1940s, then, to Duncan's return from Europe in the spring of 1956 is a span of approximately eight years Duncan refers to. The manuscript of the poem is deposited in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

4. Spicer spent the summer and autumn months of 1956 in Boston, where he worked in the Rare Book Room of the Boston Public Library. Blaser and Felts lived in Boston (Beacon Hill) and Duncan was a visitor there, at a time when he was also traveling with Jess Collins to Majorca, Spain, and Black Mountain, North Carolina.

5. Robert Duncan to Robin Blaser, February 28, 1959, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

6. Frank O'Hara to Jasper Johns, July 15, 1959; Joe LeSueur to the author, June 27, 1983. In his interview with me Robert Duncan speculates on the Spicer–O'Hara connection in this way: "I keep wondering what would have happened if Spicer and O'Hara really could have talked together. Because Jack's affect here seems very much like O'Hara's, which is to absolutely insist on the democratization and anti–snob character of the language. Whereas Robin and"—Duncan's voice and eyebrow rising—"*I*, I suppose, have been snobbish." (Lewis Ellingham (hereafter LE)/Robert Duncan Interview (I), p. 37)

7. John Button, "Some Memories," *No Apologies*, No. 2 (May 1984), p. 31. John Button died at 53, December 12, 1982, in New York City.

8. LE/Landis Everson Interview, pp. 31–32; LE/George Stanley Interview (II), pp.
117–118; LE/Stan Persky Interview, p. 77; LE/Robert Duncan Interview (II), p. 109.

9. LE/Ron Loewinsohn Interview, pp. 15–16.

10. LE/Fran Herndon Interview, pp. 1–3, 15–17.

11. Gary Bottone to the author, January 11, 1984; LE/Ron Primack Interview, p. 57; LE/Graham Mackintosh Interview, pp. 55–56.

12. LE/RDc Interview (I),. p. 43, (II)d pp. 82–88, 93, 111–112, 114; Robert Duncan, "Preface,"*One Night Stand and Other Poems* (S.F.: Grey Fox, 1980), pp. ix–xxvii; LE/George Stanley Interview (I), p. 95.

* * *

"THE KING'S TWO BODIES":

1. Emily Dickinson's poem is as follows:

I heard a fly buzz when I died;
The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air
Between the heaves of storm.

The eyes beside had wrung them dry,
And breaths were gathering sure
For that last onset, when the king
Be witnessed in his power.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me I
Could make assignable,—and then
There interposed a fly.

With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,
Between the light and me;
And then the windows failed, and then
I could not see to see.

2. Clayton Eshleman, "The Lorca Working," *Boundary* 2, 4, No. 1 (Fall 1977), 45.

3. Paul Alexander, to the author, April 8, 1986, pp. 1-2; Bill Brodecky, by telephone to the author, April 6, 1986. Buzz Gallery was located at 1711 Buchanan Street, San Francisco.

4. Helen Adam, "I Love My Love," *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, ed. Donald M. Allen (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 116-117.

5. From "Sporting Life," *Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (L.A.: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), pp. 219-220.

6. For a fuller text of what is said by Ellingham and Blaser, *see* Lewis Ellingham's (somewhat edited) interview with Robin Blaser, followed through this chapter, in the magazine *No Apologies*, No. 1 (1983), pp. 6-20; in addition, the complete interview text, and the tape from which it is taken, is on deposit at the New Poetry Archive, University of California at San Diego, as are all the interviews, letters and monographs cited in *Poet, Be Like God.*

7. Robert Duncan, "Biographical Note," *The New American Poetry*, pp. 432-436; and "On Les Chimères" in *Audit*, 4, No. 3 (1967), pp. 38-64.

8. *Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, p. 227.

9. Jack Spicer, "Chapter One of a Detective Novel," *Caterpillar*, No 12 (July 1970), pp. 148–161.

10. For "The Dancing Ape" poem, see Jack Spicer's *One Night Stand and Other Poems*, p. 18.

11. Mary Rice Moore in telephone conversations with the author, September 17, 1984.

12. "Jack Spicer's Letters to Allen Joyce," ed. Bruce Boone, *Sulfur*, 4, No. 1 (1984), pp. 140–153; Gary Bottone, in a letter to the author, January 11, 1984, assures that all correspondence between Jack Spicer and him was destroyed; Jack Spicer, "Letters to Graham Mackintosh," *Caterpillar*, No. 12, pp. 83-115 (approximately half those written; the entire collection of those written is on deposit at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley); an edition of Spicer's letters is in preparation for publication by Lori Chamberlain.

13. Robert Duncan, "The Homosexual in Society," *Politics*, (August 1944), pp. 209–211, revised and much expanded in *Jimmy & Lucy's House of K*, No. 3 (January 1985), pp. 51–69.

14. James Herndon on Jack Spicer, *re* Blaser's text herein, *Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, pp. 375–376.

15. Jack Spicer, "Psychoanalysis: An Elegy," *One Night Stand and Other Poems*, pp. 38–39.

16. Blaser has a fuller and somewhat different Hugo version in his own *Image-Nations 1–12 & The Stadium of the Mirror* (London: Ferry Press, 1974), p. 56:

He is free to go or not to go onto that terrifying promontory of thought from which darkness is perceived—if he goes on that peak he is caught. The profound waves of the marvelous have appeared to him.

17. LE/Robin Blaser Interview (I), pp. 45-54; 59-76. *See* Note 6 above.

Poet Tics

for Charles Bernstein

I think I'm leaving the essay form behind. This is all I want do anymore. Write down my thots a note at a time. Give up that false surface which insists unity and let the unity find its own point of cohesion.

Or not.

So there I was in San Francisco. I'd thrown my back out, badly, and was limping around the bookstores—first downtown and then later out in Berkeley—looking for books by Charles Bernstein. I went to five bookstores in a row. Literary ones. They didn't have any of his books in the first four. But in the fifth one, Cody's, I found a copy of an early one called *Shade*. And I thot as I was buying it well maybe this is how you can tell the really new poetry. It never seems to make it into the bookstores.

At some point I began to realize that I wasn't going to make it to the colloquium on the new poetics because after all there was Ellie & Sarah to think of and I'd been out of town a lot and my back still wasn't better after five months and really I had to stay home and take it easy. And that seemed right. Sometimes there just isn't time for poetry. You get the tic, but nothing happens. You're in idle, turning things over in your mind, your mind turning over, marking time, marking, time.

Having realized I wasn't going to make it (to the colloquium that is) I thot well really I should write a statement about what I'm up to. But I've spent the last five years trying to be very articulate about that and periodically Steve tells me I'm just making a fool of myself and I say 'well, that's what I believe' and he just laughs or looks exasperated. I think I know what I'm doing. I think. I know. What I'm doing.

I keep saying I don't know why I write. And I mean by that that beyond all the talk I've already done about it there's something in me that simply loves to write. And it's that something I don't know the why of. Something that happens outside of any notion of wish or desire. Like a tic. Did i say that? Yes, like a tic.

It's true. I've begun to think writing's just a kind of tic, a reflex as it were. And then on top of that one comes up with explanations about why one's particular tic is a little further out than one's neighbour's. Future is tic.

The first trick was to give up the illusion of mastery. It's like the old zen teaching lesson. I used to think you achieved mastery (with any luck) somewhere in your 40's. Now I know that what it's all about is apprenticeship. Masters are an illusion. The term 'apprentice' is also an illusion, but useful in a transitional way while part of me still clings to notions of mastery. Like the way I feel when I meet a writer I really respect. Just another tic I guess. Just another genuflect from the autonomic poetic system.

I wanted to write about all that stuff which underlies craft. Autonomic's a good metaphor for it. Or tics. Like when I first got the right to vote I voted liberal and when I really looked at it I realized it was because my dad had always been a liberal. Psychological residue which translates into social residue. I don't think writers are any more useful than gardeners but part of me wants to feel special. That's another tic to understand, another rictus. An aesthete tic.

Writing's my way of making sense of things, of staying sane, gives me some inner feeling of balance that makes it possible to live in the world, in time. Tic talk.

What I'm mostly aware of are the contradictions. I keep meeting writers who love junk culture but keep it out of their 'serious' writing. And I've always wanted to find ways to get that all in, everything under one roof. Because on the one hand I've been interested in control (& hence 'notation' and all my work with open form poetics) and on the other hand I've been interested in all those things you can't control but only, perhaps, contain. So I've tried to set up poetic environments in which those uncontrollable effects can tic away alongside, or even inside, the controlled ones. And there I was in Amsterdam and the sign across the road said 'Artis' and what it meant was 'zoo'.

Artis a zoo.

Poetry for sure too.

A

TALONBOOKS

SECTION

Cover, Talonbooks catalogue, 1974.

BARRY McKINNON

With Jim Brown: Vancouver Writing Seen in the 60s

BARRY McKINNON: Nelson is an interesting and important place in terms of B.C. poetics, and you are definitely part of that landscape. When you were growing up there did you have a sense of writing and art and wanting to became an artist?

JIM BROWN: Well, the first writing I did was science fiction, and we had a university there that was started as a junior college and we had an art school, and the university and the art school were essential to the spirit of Nelson. It was a small town but somehow different than other mining towns and logging towns—it had culture. People of Lionel Kearns's age—there was a band called the Kampus Kings which played jazz, and various people—the Carney family, Pat Carney is in politics and Tom Carney writes, and various families that had kids just older than me, like the Lanes [Red and Pat] and the Kearns. They were like a wave of people and the tradition was that you leave your spawning grounds in the mountains and go down the rivers to the coast where the scene is. I remember staying in Steve Barrett's garret (he was a painter and he had a folk music club called the Bunkhouse) and I remember meeting all sorts of weird personalities such as Joe Pilot and getting my first chance to hear jazz at the Blue Horn and Flat Five clubs, the Inquisition, places like that.

BM: This would be the early 60s.

JB: I started writing science fiction when I was 14 and it never came to anything and then I wrote sports for the *Nelson Daily News* for awhile, mostly covering all of the kids' sports events, but it was actually getting something published. And I see that, long before I knew I was a writer, I was actually doing it. I was going to be a professional baseball player at one point and I actually had a try-out at a camp, an Oriole/Mounties camp for the north west, but writing was happening. While I was at junior college, I was sending out endless submissions to *The Canadian Forum*—and all of those places that were in the big world for a guy living in Nelson...you must have had experiences like that.

BM: Oh yeh, the same thing—being in Calgary and sending out poems. You're always drawn out of these small towns and cities that don't have a great amount of activity, although—was it Notre Dame in Nelson?

JB: Yeah. It started out as really small, an old bakery, and it was funded by the Roman Catholic church. It got to the point where it got to be a 4 year bachelor of arts degree granting university. Well Barry, while we're on this, let me ask you a question. What do you think drew you to Montreal rather than Vancouver?

BM: There might be a connection in this. I knew Vancouver and I'd actually seen *Talon*, for instance, so it was one literary magazine that I had seen.

JB: You'd seen *Talon* in Calgary?

BM: Brad Robinson brought copies out. He was a Vancouverite who had gone to Sylvan Lake, of all places. There was a Sylvan Lake connection for musicians from Vancouver—Ron Probie, for instance, you might have hear of him, and P.J. Perry. The Perry family had this summer gig and I think they eventually bought the dance hall.

JB: So music was out there too, sifted down from the bigger towns.

BM: The Vancouver connection was these bebop musicians coming down to play in the after hours clubs in Calgary, from Sylvan Lake, usually after the summer holidays, and in this situation I met Brad Robinson. I wanted to be a jazz musician at that point, but I had been writing lots of poetry. I ran into Brad in a jazz club—he was a friend of Ron Probie—and he said something like, "well, what do you do?" And I said, "I'm a drummer and I also write a bit." [laughter] So he said, "show me your writing," and so I showed him some writing and he got interested in what I was doing.

JB: So Brad was your first contact with—

BM: With the west.

JB: With all of that contact how come you went the other way?

BM: I guess it was really the attraction to Leonard Cohen and Irving Layton, who were really visible, the two most visible poets in Canada, certainly in the early 60s.

JB: Well, you see, in Nelson they weren't. In Nelson the most visible poets were the *Tish* group because David Barrett, of the Barrett family who were very important in the music scene, was a personal friend of David Dawson, Frank Davey, Dan McLeod, Peter Auxier, *et al.*, and I wouldn't like to say who he was a personal friend of so much as that he brought *Tish* back to writers like myself; and so all of a sudden Cohen, to me, although I admired him and emulated him somewhat for sure, and learned a lot, and Layton, they were almost as remote as Gerard Manley Hopkins. What I was wondering is if it was the divide—if people from that side of the mountains went east.

BM: Oh yes, that certainly had something to do with it.

JB: You really felt closer to Montreal?

BM: The question was, and maybe it was the question for you too, where do you go to be a poet in Canada? [laughter] Besides, I had been accepted at Sir George Williams University.

JB: Right, exactly. Well, in Nelson you went to Vancouver, for sure.

BM: So you're on *this* side of the mountains. In Calgary our access to culture was via C.B.C. and the one or two literary magazines that might hit the bookstores. *Talon* seemed to me a place, and I started publishing in it, I think fairly regularly at that point. It was a connection but it didn't have in a young kid's impressionable mind enough energy or enough draw to lead me to say, "oh, I'm going to Vancouver instead."

JB: *Talon* was basically a high school magazine and it had attracted some writers who had talent, but it published almost no one who was an established good writer. When I became associated with *Talon* there was a conscious decision. *Talon* was edited by a committee—there was no one big person in it, so what would happen is the poems would come in during the quarterly period, and then they would all be read by a committee out loud, which was a good way of deciding what was good. But at one point there was a definite decision that they wanted to get established writers to give the magazine more credibility, and to give their younger writers association with names like John Newlove, Al Purdy, bpNichol, etc. Ok, just let me finish this thing about Nelson. I knew that I was a writer when I got a poem accepted by *The Canadian Forum.*

BM: Me too! [laughter]

JB: I had completed 2 or 3 years, a vague amount of junior college, which became 2 years when I got to U.B.C. because of downgrading, because Notre Dame didn't really have the whack—and that poem got accepted. It was published within the first month I was at UBC. I had a poem in *The Canadian Forum* and got accepted in *Quarry* and various of the magazines that were essential to establishing your own—I think it's very important to remember that small magazines help poets establish their own beliefs, as much as they allow the poetry to get read, mostly by an inner circle of people who read poetry magazines. Almost every publishing venture I've been involved in has had that as the spirit of publishing, the reason to do it. So, the music in Nelson and the college, the art school. Andy Suknaski was a student there and I remember there was a writers' club that one of the teachers, Bob Green, had—and most of the people that went there ended up doing something in writing—I think Andy was in a couple of the meetings and a guy named Robin Fox. Do you know Robin Fox?

BM: No, but I do know Andy, and not to digress too far, but he was a visual artist and a ceramic artist who was getting interested in writing and actually took a lot of that art background and became a multi-media artist, in a sense, concrete poetry—before he branched into a kind of narrative verse.

JB: I knew Andy vaguely at that time, but my mother knew him much better and she was quite fond of him because he was one of the stabilizing forces in what became known as "Mrs. Brown's Rooming House." I've even run into people in various cities here and there who say, "well, when I was at the art school I stayed at Mrs. Brown's rooming house." So, anyway, those groups were very important. I'm sure that had I been brought up in another city where I didn't have the ability to actually go to what was called a writers' club, or to hear some jazz, or to meet some of the people who were coming and going...In my last year there I had a coffee house with 2 people and that coffee house was really important. We had poetry readings, we had a Shakespearean play that we put on, and we had people coming and going across on the folk scene. Brent Titcombe came through. Steve Barrett and Joe Mock cam up. Mostly people came from the coast, and if they could book into there, they would go across.

BM: In fact they did. There was a connection—again, I'm talking early 60s, 1962. The Depression Coffee House in Calgary was where I met Brent Titcombe, for instance, so there was a kind of bohemian underground.

JB: Very much so. In fact, I guess it's worthwhile noting that at that time it was fashionable to dress, not in blue jeans particularly, but in black,

although none of us were beatniks, definitely the *idea* of being beat, or with the beat, which rapidly became popularized by the Beatles. The idea of the beat, Kerouac I believe calls it a spontaneous bop prosody, is what he was after in writing, which was like a jazz improvisation. You guys had a bit of that flavour in Calgary? I don't know, I didn't go there until after these years.

BM: Another woman, Cecily Kwiat had come up from San Francisco, for instance, and she was a poet. And Brad was around and again, these bebop musicians who were quite heavy for a kid my age to be hanging out with. The folk scene was quite incredible in Calgary—Joni Mitchell, the Irish Rovers, David Whiffin and many others got their start there. Pot started to become part of the drug lexicon.

JB: Various things like bennies. [laughter]

BM: Oh yeh, pills were big because still, at that time, marijuana was associated with madness and long jail terms. [laughter] So it was quite heavy to be around these people in those days—exciting but also scary at times. I got drawn more into poetry. You could do it on your own and be independent. I could see that the jazz world was a very dark and an awful place in some ways, although the music was marvellous.

JB: Well, to a boy from a small town, which even Calgary qualified as...

BM: And Brad, although I don't think he really said it, more or less convinced me to change my course from music and to write—that that's where my talent was. He was a large influence on me at that time—quite encouraging. He submitted some of my writing to *Talon*, I believe, and got me published, so there was that accompanying feeling—it's like that William Carlos Williams line, "I am a poet, I am a poet." I was given legitimacy as a writer.

JB: Well, your legitimacy was present at the first cooperative editing meeting of *Talon* that I attended. Barry McKinnon's poems were there to be considered and Barry was a poet. There was no doubt that they were going to publish something by you unless it had been crap, which it wasn't. So I first heard of you as a published poet. You were somebody, and you might have even by that time—65, were you back east? You'd just gone back east that time.

I guess the other important thing about Nelson is Ross Barrett. I played various types of music, mostly rock and roll, with Ross in various bands, and when we came to UBC—he was studying in music and I was

studying in arts—at some point he said what Brad said to you. Why don't you forget about playing rock and roll and concentrate on your writing. I don't know if he actually said those words, but it threw me for a loop in a way that within 2 or 3 years I was making electronic music poetry settings with Ross, and finding that I could be involved with music, but not as a player. So I guess that's Nelson, Barry. Lionel Kearns in his introduction to *If There are Any Noahs* said that I was just one in a long tradition of people who migrated down the rivers, and I think it's a real image.

BM: Someday somebody will track all of those roots—Wah, Bowering, Kearns, the Lanes, etc....

JB: Fred Wah is another Nelson person. I played little league ball with his younger brother Ernie, and never knew Fred until I looked him up after he had graduated and left *Tish* and gone back to the Kootenays.

BM: And in Prince George, a little later, people like Brian Fawcett. In the province itself, Vancouver becomes the place.

JB: Bowering and the Lanes were in the Okanagan Valley, so that's where you all ended up—Vancouver.

BM: Vancouver.

JB: The Advance Mattress Coffee House. Did you every go there?

BM: No, I didn't get out here until 1967.

JB: That was a funny little coffee house and my first ever poetry reading as such. I think it was Very Stone House, which was a group of 4 poets gathered together to put their energy behind publishing themselves and people who had not published before.

BM: This is Seymour Mayne, Pat Lane, bill bissett and yourself.

JB: Yes. We had published 4 chapbooks—they were offset printed but most of them were typewriter face I believe. So we had a reading. I'd never read my poetry in public although I'd read it to lots of people at parties and stuff, and I remember that the person who read before me was that great garrulous scarred fellow—what was his name?

BM: Milton Acorn.

JB: Milton Acorn. A great reader, and his voice was so confident and booming; it filled every inch of that little coffee house—and I got up there and I was, you know, my gawd. The Very Stone House name came from a quote from the Bible, "and the very stones cry out." It was on our brochure, on our poster, so I read that quote from the Bible to steady myself down. [laughter] You probably have a reminiscence or two about your first poetry reading. But I remember reading and feeling more and more confident, and looking at my watch after I'd read for this eternity and it was 10 minutes. [laughter] I'm running out of poems—this is a hard business to get into—and I sat down and there was a break, and Milton Acorn came over to me and shook my hand and said, "wow, that was one fine reading" or some words to that effect and that was the most important thing...the most important thing before that had been getting accepted by *The Canadian Forum*. There are moments in a writer's life. The other moment that I was going to tell you about is the one about Leonard Cohen and meeting him. I was giving him a ride off campus and I gave him a copy of *The Circus in the Boy's Eye* which was a Very Stone book, in many ways my best book—I hope to write another one that good maybe—and he looked at it and saw bissett's drawings and caught the flavour of it right away and I sort of apologized. I said, "well, I published it myself, so it's not really published." Cohen looks at me as we're driving along and says, "well, you know, that's how I got started," and I said, "no you didn't, your first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, was published by the McGill University Press, or am I wrong?" And he said, "yes, but that was *me*."

BM: I thought it was Louis Dudek who started it. It sounds like Cohen prompted Dudek and his authority to start a series.

JB: Well that's what he said that day. Now I think we'd been sitting around in the faculty club or somewhere for awhile. That night there was a party and there again the confirmation came. Cohen came into the party and he was the star of the event. I only had a chance for maybe 4 sentences with him and one of them was, he thanked me very much for my book, said he'd read some of the poems and thought they were really good. You couldn't have given me drugs, alcohol, women, anything that would have done more for me at that time.

BM: Just to get the date on this, this is the mid 60s?

JB: This all happened within my first year at UBC—1965 in September—and within 6 weeks of that I was a member of the *Talon* editing board which was simply by answering an ad in the UBC newspaper. Anybody could have gone; it wasn't like I had any special talent. Then

people who kept going became more and more involved with the magazine. At the end of that year the editing was being done by David Robinson and myself. The committee was still there, and it still helped out with collating and stuff, but they realized—they were sort of like a poetry society—that they'd better have some specialization.

BM: I remember names like Janie McElwie.

JB: She was a darling lady with a good sense of what poetry was, but her favourite poet in *Talon* was Chris Elsted and he wrote things that went no further than the weakest Dylan Thomas, excuse me Chris—and many pages of it. You must have seen it.

BM: I was impressed by the volume of it, because I was writing short lyrics and all of a sudden here's a guy who is writing, not epic poetry, but long poems.

JB: Well he had epics. He wanted *Talon* to devote 3 or 4 issues to one of his epics and there was a natural animosity between him and me because I said, why don't we go out and get bill bissett, John Newlove—Peggy Atwood was going to be coming. Why don't we go out and solicit some poems from those people. At *Talon* they had never actively solicited poems; they had merely opened up their doors and had gotten a long way by that method.

BM: It was probably important to solicit those people. When I was reading *Talon* I thought, here's David Phillips, here's Jim Brown. I started to recognize the names, and here's Ken Belford, Pat Lane, John Newlove—and those people didn't seem to be publishing in a lot of other places—Newlove maybe. But it gave me the sense that these were among the best writers in Vancouver, so I started to wait for issues.

JB: We were quarterly then. That was very hard to do. All of us were students.

BM: *Tish* was not readily available. It had started to build its own mythology. But I thought that *Talon* was an active magazine for young writers who really didn't have another outlet.

JB: The difference between *Talon* and *Tish*, I'd like to suggest, is the format. *Tish* was a mimeographed poetry newsletter of poetry comment, and criticism, 8 1/2 x 14 folded with no cover;*Talon* had a glossy cover and it was shaped like a book, 8 1/2 x 11 folded. *Tish* was an anagram for shit

and so it was slightly offensive to some people, especially further into the hinterland; and secondly, the format was irreverent—in fact they were still continuing the work of Ezra Pound—in smashing the poem apart and shaping it into a 20th century vehicle. [laughter] Unquote! The name *Talon* never stood for anything. *Talon* never contained criticism or comment. So within that first year, to get us to that poetry reading, I met so many poets and I could not have met them and formed friendships had I not been a writer. It was essential on the scene.

BM: You had to be active.

JB: Not just active, you had to be good. There were people who were skulking around. There was a guy named Greydon Moore who for all the world would have loved to have been a poet, and wrote a great long epic called *The Ode to Manu.*

Within a year, by 1966, I was involved with publishing *Talon*, not only as an editor. I changed the layout of the magazine. The layout was disorganized, and I, as part of typewriter art, part of the imposition of the typewriter, I reorganized the format. I put in the back a list of the writers, which had never been in there before, and I thought that was important. And I got involved in Very Stone House with people all much more capable than me. bill bissett was in many ways a guru to some of the people in Vancouver, and a real leader, a real innovator. Pat Lane and his brother Red had both published in *Tish* , or at least Red Lane had, but they weren't Tishites—and Seymour Mayne was the first basketball that was bouncing out from your group of people. Did you know Seymour back east when you were there?

BM: When I got there, there really wasn't a scene. There was a magazine put out by Mayne called *Cataract.* He was one of the editors and I just thought it was no good.

JB: It had a prankish sort of attitude about it.

BM: Yeh. They were working out of, I guess it was Layton's lesson. Unless you were involved in a harangue, or polemic, or publicly testing your own manhood as a poet, then you weren't a magazine or you weren't a poet. So I thought that magazine, those attitudes, were somehow on the wrong track, and over a period of a couple of years, to connect with what I was saying earlier, I got more attracted back to the west. Finally, Montreal didn't seem to have much of a so-called writing scene.

JB: But to me it did. I wasn't there so I'll give you my version of the view. My view of it was exactly what you're saying; poetry meant that you had to say fuck a lot, or you had to be a predator in sex and that it should be probably spouted at the top of your lungs—the Layton tradition. The reason Very Stone House was formed was because nobody was publishing poets in the west. All of the money from the grants was going to people in the east, and also the publishing firms were all in the east; in fact, it's hard to even grasp how desperate it was for writers in the west to get anything other than a self-produced chapbook done. There was bitterness. Al Neil had a wonderful book called *The Book of Changes*, which finally got published much later. It had been turned down and turned down. And you know, there were the usual arguments about west coast poetry, that it just wasn't poetry.

BM: It crops up again and again—the argument between the east and the west. The connection for me became Toronto via bpNichol who was running *GrOnk* magazine, and he published *we sleep inside each other all* by bissett.

JB: Fantastic book.

BM: Fantastic book, and I thought, *this* is starting to make more sense to me, the *Tish* writers and what I was hearing from out west, than what was going on in Montreal, which was basically the artist as tortured, mythmaker, loner, etc. You could fit all kinds of adjectives into that definition.

JB: Bliss Carmen went around in a cape and did all of the things that Leonard Cohen did that had nothing to do with his poetry; it had lots to do with lifestyle, which for Leonard was important and he wouldn't have had such an impact had he not done that.

BM: I guess, in most general terms, that romantic sense of the poet in the—

JB: European tradition.

BM: Yes, I think so. And in Montreal, that was the closest thing to the European tradition that you'll get in Canada and maybe North America.

JB: Well then perhaps the most important difference between the two scenes was Warren Tallman, because Warren Tallman, a man who never told anybody to do anything, had his own doctrine but never tried to force that

mould on anyone, simply became a catalyst and brought people here who were good writers. His business was being a teacher. But he brought the writers. He was instrumental in having them come. I can't say he did it all by himself, but the fact that there was a poetry conference in 1963—people like Jack Spicer came, I believe, and Michael McClure and a couple of other people: Robert Duncan, Creeley, Olson. They all came and the fact that they were American was one of the reasons why west coast poetry was downridden by the rest of Canada, because all of a sudden we were regarded as writing satellite American poetry; however, that wasn't the point at all. What was happening was that none of the eastern writers were really coming her, and when they did, they were expressing themselves in a verse style that was an—

BM: —alien language. [laughter]

JB: An alien language, Barry, right.

BM: That actually clarifies some things for me, because if local writers aren't getting access to publishing in the east or not getting any attention in the east, it's obvious that the north/south connection starts to open up—the yankees coming through the southern corridor route.

JB: The west coast scene!

BM: Exactly. And it starts to get clear that that would be the natural connection to make, but also, to give attention and legitimacy to local writers. The whole question of legitimacy keeps cropping up.

JB: Well, someone born in Vancouver didn't go to Calgary or Nelson; they went to San Francisco and City Lights Books—and their scene was something that people would go to and come back and bring part of that culture back to Vancouver.

BM: So we've got Tallman and that connection. Now, Very Stone House, just to connect that part of your work as a publisher...Very Stone House is not really an offshoot of *Talon*.

JB: No, Very Stone House was prior to Talonbooks, independent of *Talon*. Very Stone was very much alive when Talonbooks was formed. What happened was David Robinson and I were doing, I think, great things with *Talon* magazine. We were running into the usual hassles about money and the distribution and the workload. There was a lot of work and it was more and more falling on our heads because the committee of people was falling

away, and David was taking a year and going to Europe. I remember we went down to the printers and took in or picked up the magazine, whichever phase we were at, and I remember my girlfriends got stuck with the job of typing it—I always had girfriends who were good typists. We went to the Bay cafeteria and David and I had some kind of lunch—for us that was stepping out a bit, university students getting to the Bay—and I remember asking David, I don't know if I said what is your dream, or what is your vision, and he said he would really like to have an actual publishing house, or to be a part of one. He saw himself as a publisher. Well, that takes vision. He wasn't a poet, and the one thing that you have to constantly admire about David Robinson is that he's done a lot for west coast writers selflessly, whether you agree with his direction or not. He's done more than any other person, other than Warren Tallman, that I know of. I said to David, "well, rather than my continuing to work with Very Stone House Books, let's put out a line of books from *Talon* that are called Talonbooks," and we both liked the word. He went off to Europe, and by the time he got back from his year in Europe, which I'm sure did a lot for our publishing house too because he came back having stepped outside of the scene, I had gone ahead and published Ken Belford's book *Fireweed*, one of the very best first books published in Canadian poetry.

BM: I agree.

JB: Then I had to continue with the spirit of Very Stone House—published one by my self. [laughter] One for you and one for me. [laughter] And it was a much more uneven book than *Circus in the Boy's Eye*. I had no outside help in the editing.

BM: Is that book *If There are Any Noahs*?

JB: Yes. And it had a thematic, almost European type of thing—poems about escaping the bomb. The Noah atomic submarine metaphor was taken from that great movie *On the Beach*—the idea of the only survivors of that probably having to be in atomic submarines. I don't think that any of those Noah poems have made it into the 80s—not poems from the whole book, but those about the atomic submarine. So anyway, these two books were published as Very Stone House and Talon, and the reason that was done was that in those days distribution was the biggest problem. We were having a hard time getting libraries across Canada to buy our stuff. Very Stone House and *Talon* both had mailing lists, so at that point *Talon* began to freely advertise Very Stone House books in their pages, and Very Stone House began to send out all of the *Talon* advertising, so basically it was cooperation through the need to get your stuff out there.

BM: So your activity at Very Stone House drifted into Talonbooks.

JB: Yes, almost totally. bill bissett's blewointment press had been going on for years before this and was a total experience. There were various things stapled into that mag that one can't even mention in public. [laughter] You never knew what you were going to find because every copy was different. In fact, one of the things that I learned first about publishing was walking around a table collating pages. It's in *If There are Any Noahs*. Can I read a poem? Why not, it won't hurt anybody. This is the poem about blewointment press, the bissetts. Now Ooljah is the Turkish word for tulip and it refers to bill's daughter Ooljah.

The Bissetts

ooljah says my dolly doesn't grow
any older, bijou knocked over the
egg things

bill tells me THEY let people get famous
after they're dead, it's safe then, they
can't change anything

martina is never the background
she says you know I'm tired ooljah
and you come to me with this great big
question

we circle the room the three of us
putting bill's book together we circle
,ooljah plays witches with her cats
around her feet

everything happens on dec the first
the bulldozers are coming the bulldozers
are coming everything happens on dec th first
they're going t make a freeway
right through our house everything happens
going to make a free way on dec the first
th bulldozers are comin on dec th first
right through our house a free way

ooljah has fallen asleep

in bill's arms and he is carrying
her off to her room
martina brings up hot chocolate
we warm our fingers on our mugs
the circle begins shadows of three
moving in a dream ooljah has fallen
asleep it is late tomorrow the rain
and friday the bulldozers

You know, that doomed sense surrounded *blewointment*, and blewointment press has survived everything in the same way that something like City Lights Books or something has. They just kept doing what they were doing quietly. And bill bissett continued to publish *blewointment* and started doing blewointment books at some point.

Seymour and Pat Lane became Very Stone House, so Very Stone House had two phases. It had the phase where there was the 4 of us and all these public readings and things to drum up the interest.

I became a member of the arts committee for the UBC arts festival and was instrumental in getting in bpNichol, Robert Creeley, Randall Jarrell, and various people, to come to the festival. I think we had a gala reading of 39 poets or somethings, once—and an issue of *Talon* entitled *Poets Market* was devoted to these poets. The second phase of Very Stone House was very much the publishing efforts of Pat Lane and Seymour Mayne, and they produced a very important book, the Red Lane collection. I believe they did a book by Path Lowther. They did a couple or 3 important books.

BM: Wasn't there a thing called Very Stone House in transit when Pat started to move around a bit?

JB: I don't remember. Seymour had finished his two years, his degree at UBC...Seymour was a person transported out of the Montreal poetry scene. He came to Vancouver and by the end of it he was writing west coast stuff. There is a poem or two in this anthology *West Coast Seen*. He was one of those people who sat on his poems and polished them for 5 years. It was part of, I think Layton's tradition to work on a poem. I might be wrong about that.

BM: Well, it's a kind of poetry where you could do that. They weren't working out of spontaneous bop prosody. They were working out of god knows what. It might have involved that whole debate between open and closed verse forms. The easterners, for the most part, were writing a kind of closed verse.

JB: Right. It wasn't sonnets but it—

BM: It would be a "modern" closed form almost. Probably somebody like Seymour and Pat finally didn't feel too comfortable, weren't going to swing with the poetic that seemed to be emerging here.

JB: Well, both Seymour and Pat seemed to, as the years went by toward the end of the 60's, become more dogmatic. Now they might not seem themselves that way, but I was ever embracing more and more things into what I called poetry and breaking down barriers. It seemed with them that they were becoming more—okay, this is the wrong word, but it will suffice—"picky" about what was poetry.

BM: And they were reading, I suppose, Europeans and South Americans and in a sense wanted the poem to be a vehicle for some particular kind of vision or message. I'm not putting that kind of poetry down, but it goes counter to the spontaneity, that other method.

JB: The "Margin series" that Red Lane (Pat's older brother who died) wrote, that appeared in *Tish*, embodied to me both the spirit of my group of people, supposedly the Talon group as you suggested, and the Tish group. In other words, Red Lane was a character who wasn't in any group, and the whole idea of the open letter as a poem...the concept of never establishing anything and making it a fortress—therefore you'd have to break it down, and so don't establish fortresses.

BM: Yes, that's a good way of putting it.

JB: I don't know if he used that metaphor but that was something that was a struggle here on the west coast, because there was a tendency to want to produce the kind of poems that would be successful back east, and that McClelland and Stewart would publish in a book of your poetry. The reason I think that Talonbooks and Very Stone House and blewointment press in particular are important, is that they were...none of those things, publications, were publishing any criticism except *Tish*, and *Tish* criticism was definitely spontaneous bop criticism. So at Talon we were simply saying "this is valid poetry—so what if it jumps all over the page?" If you don't like that then all you're doing is not accepting our convention, which is that the typewriter is a method of composition and the page is like a musical score or an open field, to use certain American, Black Mountain kinds of phrases. [laughter] You crib from everywhere you can, Barry. [laughter]

BM: Having no ideas of our own! [laughter]

JB: Right, well if a man has an unique idea on his own, he's a lucky person, I believe.

BM: This is interesting, because if you have *Tish* on one extreme...I'm almost tired of talking about that magazine because it's probably overblown in terms of what it actually was [laughter]—its influence.

JB: Well, I remember reading a poem in *Tish*, a copy that filtered down to Nelson. Then I went out and found an anthology called *Beat Coast East*, and it had that great poem about the violin and the donkey, whatever that was, written by one of the successful American poets at that time.

BM: It sounds like Corso or somebody like that.

JB: But it had everybody, and then there was the great book *New American Poetry* which had everybody again, and if it hadn't been for *Tish* and reading just 2 or 3 poems out of the issues of *Tish* that I saw, that to me sounded beat, cool, relaxed, and worth emulating—so at that point when I saw *Tish*, I stopped emulating Dylan Thomas and Gerard Manley Hopkins and Leonard Cohen.

BM: Which brings you in to the modern world so to speak.

JB: Right. It brought me to the present. I think it had a value for that.

BM: Whether you agree or disagree, finally, with the poetics or not. Most of the writers I know formed their own way of going about it, or it had already been formed anyway. But certainly, what this town seemed to do was force you to deal with those large aesthetic questions. I think back east that kind of activity didn't seem to be as important. But here, a constant large and daily conversation was going on. Of course, after awhile you just want to go to the hardware store and buy a hammer and build an outhouse or something, because it's too heavy man! [laughter]

JB: If we're going chronologically in this interview you're going to get to the point where I did that. [laughter] You see, in those days there were two polarities. One of them was between *Tish* and *blewointment*, and there were people who said when we would have a reading, well all you did was invite these blewointment writers, and they were actually thought of as a stable of writers that bissett had developed through his publication. And then there was *Tish*, and they were at odds with each other. And there was another

polarity between the creative writing department at UBC, that you had some experience with, and that was another group of Americans—I guess you could call them classicists or something like that—particularly J. Michael Yates, who was a very strong poet; he had his own dogma.

BM: Part of it was: don't pay much attention to the local. [laughter]

JB: Yes, that was the thing. He wanted to foster a translation tradition—a magazine which Earl Birney, or his crew of people started in the earlier era of the creative writing department, which should have been the most vital organ of west coast poetry. In the hands of that group of people in the creative writing department, it became obsessed with translation and with writing of poetry that seemed like it was written anywhere else but North America—that's what you're saying, right? Not local; as long as it was not local then you could get published in that. What was the name of that journal? *Prism*, and then it became *Prism International*. We should have been able to publish in it. They wouldn't buy poems by people like us. They paid money too! [laughter]

BM: A few bucks in those days.

JB: If I got more than a complimentary copy, in fact if I got my complimentary copy, I felt lucky because I was still at the stage in those days where anytime somebody published something by me I wanted a copy. I'd put it on my wall almost.

So those were the two polarities. *Talon* and *Prism* were both coming out of UBC and they were opposed to each other, and then there were the downtown poets—*blewointment*.

BM: And Gerry Gilbert.

JB: Gerry Gilbert was more in line with *blewointment* although he probably would nave never said that himself. He was an individual force, but in those days he wasn't into publication. *B.C. Monthly* became a very valuable magazine but it was, I think, a 70s magazine. You didn't get to the question. I butted in.

BM: I think you're right about the European connection, and J. Michael Yates.

JB: The non-local.

BM: Which meant, again, that the locals and the people here who were working out of a different poetic essentially, had some trouble fitting into the UBC creative writing department. It was exclusive and off on its own.

JB: It was regarded with derision. There were people like yourself who were in it who were writers but—

BM: I was drawn downtown.

JB: You were a member of it, but you weren't part of the poetic, I don't think, really. [laughter]

BM: No. That's why I had trouble there. I was reading and I was studying. I wasn't going to buy any notion that you had to ignore your own landscape in order to reach the cosmos. I think they said, he's here, and he's not going to screw our department up, so leave him alone. Two years of being left alone.

JB: Right. Yates must have been a good person to be the poetry person that you were relating to.

BM: Because he left me alone entirely.

JB: If he'd been a bad poet then you would have a problem because he would have been trying to correct your stuff.

BM: No, there was none of that going on. I've re-thought Yates's poetry. I think Belford writes with that kind of seriousness and drama, but it comes more out of the Williams notion of the particular to the universal, and I think that's the one link that those guys didn't pay much attention to. Yates didn't have a good musical ear. That was my problem with him—not so much the content and what he was saying. It was a technical problem. He's full of philosophical content, and I like meaning in poetry, I really do.

JB: For a long time many of the people who studied under Yates began to write in the triad form that he was using. Is that what it was called? The three line verse, and in fact the best thing that the creative writing department ever did for Talonbooks was that it sent Ken Belford to us, and I recognized Belford right away despite the fact that a lot of poetry in that book—I think all of it that got published was in the triad form or the 3 line stanzas.

BM: He revised the original poems into that 3 line form, apparently.

JB: Yes. But at that point that was probably good. He probably needed to meet someone with as much discipline as Michael Yates, because he hadn't gone through some of the things that we'd gone through—and the good thing about Michael Yates is that he would do things like that. He would say, "well look, I met this guy Belford and you should get together." He wasn't selfish, I don't really feel.

BM: No, you're right.

JB: So he sent Belford. But in those days it was like the Yankee fans and Dogers fans as to what school of poetry you belonged to. It hardly seems relevant in the 80s...the war of the word. When Ken Belford came to see me I immediately recognized it as the very best manuscript that I had anything to do with.

BM: You must have told David Robinson that this was one guy he had to print, no matter what—or something like that, because David was never quite sure...

JB: No, he had to be told. That's why we were a good team. When I took my year's leave of absence, he acquired a whole bunch of lackeys who told him what I had been telling them, only they were wrong. [laughter] He was good at following up. He is a tireless worker. He'd work all night stapling things together, and I'd say gee, I guess we've got to get that stapling done and he'd say, "no it's all done." [laughter]

BM: So that would leave you time to take drugs and chase women and study poetry. [laughter]

JB: Well, you know, from 1967 to 1970—they were my golden years, from the time that I got the Belford book out. I don't know if you've noticed it, but the Belford book and *If There are Any Noahs*, the first two Talon/Very Stone House books stapled in the back, are stapled in such a way as to give the impression—now this is getting down to the nitty gritty of the economics of publishing—[of perfect binding] with this wrap around folded cover, which cost me a lot of money—so I could sell these for more money and they sold fairly well. And the Belford book has this great cover [holds up a copy]. This is a distorted print that I saved but you can still see him here lighting the cigarette, but everything is out of register.

BM: I loved these things, and was absolutely envious of the notion of—finally a real book at last.

JB: Well you see we didn't go to what's called perfect binding until about a year later when we ran into a company, I think it was called Blaine Trade Bindery or something, who quoted us a price to do this that was cheaper than it was to do this, and we hadn't been able to find that price. Also the number of copies that we were doing went up. There were 750 of these Belford and Brown books. The Belford book got recognition for an unknown poet who had never even published in *Talon* magazine up until that point—the book was out before his first poem in a magazine ever appeared.

BM: Are you sure about that?

JB: Well, Ken might tell us that he had a publication here or there, but he didn't have more than you can count on one hand.

BM: I'll tell you a little anecdote about Ken. I went to Prince George in 1969. He showed up that fall and he phoned me about midnight and said, "Barry?" and I said, "yes" and he said, "my name is Ken Belford, you probably haven't heard of me..." I said, "no, I have, I have." [laughter] He said, "I've been reading your poetry."

JB: Well, you see, people were reading it.

BM: I'm sure I read him in *Talon* magazine. I'll have to check that. It could have been *Fireweed* that I'd read. But that moment in my life proved the other value of the little magazine. Not only does it give a writer legitimacy, but it gives you your contacts and in this case, it becomes a life long contact—long friendships that developed out of this stapled little magazine.

JB: Exactly! Mimeo heaven. [laughter]

BM: So this started a long friendship. We sat up that first night until 6 or 7 in the morning talking. He was the first poet I met up in Prince George who was familiar with Vancouver and the seriousness of writing, the seriousness of the kind of writing we were trying to do. And of course David Phillips, a similar situation—meeting him at your place in the fall of 1967.

JB: You see, David Phillips was someone who published in *Talon* because I was involved and we had mutual friends in society. David had a rich

heritage in that he'd known bpNichol (they were very good friends) and he'd been to Coach House Press.

BM: He was, I think, one of the first western writers to have a Coach House book, called *The Dream Outside*. After the Belford book, the next important thing for Talonbooks was that magic happened through David Robinson's hard work in getting money for grants. I remember David and I going to meet Naim Kattan from the Canada Council at the Bayshore Inn. David was coaching me because our talents worked off of each other, and he was coaching me—now look, this guy is a French Canadian journalist!...he probably publishes in a very prestigious newspaper (we didn't even know the name of it) and anyway, here's a guy who's sympathetic. He realizes this great rift and he realizes the resentment, but he doesn't understand it. David said, one of the things he'll probably ask is "why is there so much resentment? Why do west coast people resent the east so much? Why is there so much animosity?" And he did indeed ask us that, and we were the perfect people for the situation.

BM: Where was the grant money going? Mostly to the east.

JB: I think that's probably what I said, although I can't come up with a quote on that. I think I said, "well, the resentment is due to the fact that we're not getting published" and David said that it's absolutely necessary that a real west coast publishing house be established. Through that meeting money started to trickle to Talonbooks. Ken Belford's book and my book were produced by my own personal money, and I never got a cent back from it at all—it all went into the company. I worked in a liquor store 3 days a week and I had a full load at university, and I produced them. It's my one really benevolent act. I did it, and I've never resented it. It was an accomplishment.

BM: You were working in the liquor store so, no problem! [laughter]

JB: Well some guys in the liquor store were pretty goods guys. I was known as the poet laureate of the L.C.B., and I wrote poems about the liquor store and about the working situation and I sold quite a few books at the liquor store. [laughter] The whole idea in the 60s was trying to make poetry palatable to the people, wasn't it?

BM: I think so. To make it part of experience.

JB: Instead of being something that your aunt read and you didn't. So that was the stage where Talonbooks did its best work. We produced bill

bissett's *awake in th red desert*, and we produced a book by Jamie Ried, *The Man Whose Path Was on Fire*. We distributed a Pierre Coupey book, *Circle Without Centre*, which Pierre had done on his own. Distribution was a big reason why Very Stone House and Talon collaborated for awhile. For quite some time Pat Lane and Seymour Mayne were very helpful to us. We got a book of David Phillips's together. We did a book by Helene Rosenthal. We eventually did Peter Trower's first book with the great illustrlations by Jack Wise. Then we set upon the monster thing *West Coast Seen*. We stopped producing *Talon*. It seemed to have lost its relevancy and we had been called to a greater task. We were publishers! We didn't have a little toy magazine anymore—and in fact, the magazine had served its purpose, I think. As I'm going to say in 10 minutes or so, I think that Talonbooks at one point served its purpose. We did a lot of good books at that point, and I became associated with the music department at UBC. We were into multimedia productions; poetry readings were aided by a 500 watt amp and speakers and light shows. We produced 3 records; one of bissett, one of myself, and one of international artists including Lionel Kearns and bpNichol, and so within the period of time from 1967, in the fall when we produced the Belford and the Brown book, through to 1969 when I was not associated with UBC, we accomplished more than any small press had ever accomplished in Canada in that short period of time.

BM: The records, of course, were a whole other dimension of publishing. I don't know how that works, but I can imagine getting recording time in studios—the expense of all that.

JB: Well Barry, it was the greatest pleasure of my life. My lifelong friendship with Ross Barrett had given me access to a brand new recording studio, and an electronic music room that they built at the UBC music building. And for the bissett production—I knew that bissett was not being recognized in Canada because nobody could hear him. The only people who heard him were people who got to his readings, and some people would be scared off, so I knew that we had to produce a record of bissett whether we produced anything else or not, and to do this I formed a company called See/Hear productions, which incorporated Ross Barrett and Wayne Carr, who works at the sound studio at SFU, and that gave me unlimited access—in fact, I made friends with a person called Courtland Halpberg, not on a personal basis but to the point where he saw I was not doing anything with his equipment that was endangering it because it was his baby, and we set up the bissett recording session. As we envisioned it there was going to be bissett, and Ross was going to be looping voices so that we could have some variety. Wayne was going to be making synthesized sounds on a machine called the Buchla Box, which was a forerunner of Moog. And

bissett was going to bring a band called the Mandan Massacre. The Mandan Massacre got lost somewhere between bissett's house above the Salvation Army on 4th Avenue and UBC, and they got totally wrecked on the way. By the time they got to UBC, we were totally ready for them. I tell you, if you're going to record somebody, be ready—and they came in; Greg Simpson set up his drums, a guy who died was playing the electric guitar. There was an acoustic guitar. There were 3 or 4 people beating on things. A couple of girls were there. Martina was there. And so bissett had himself, his strong powerful voice and a band, and so it just happened. The session went along. We managed to get bill to proceed at the point where he'd let us make loops of his voice so that you can get these over-rhythms and under-rhythms and his chanting. We beat the band back occasionally and put baffles up so that they weren't too loud—and the academic guy, Wayne, who was at that point being drawn out of his academic electronic music, managed to produce music that went with bissett in a way which I've never heard anything else go with him. It was a GO session and it went solidly from 2 in the afternoon until 6 or 7 at night, and there's some good cuts.

We had an experience with Al Neil a few weeks later where it just didn't work. We had him in a perfect room and we had a 16 track tape recorder, 16 microphones. We had Al Neil's trio and lots of time to set up. In fact, they set up for 8 hours and they never got started. Al didn't ever want any of the stuff released. We released one cut on one of the records and it doesn't represent the dynamic qualities of the Al Neil trio at all. It was a failure. It was partly an oversight on our part. We were much more ready for the bissett situation. We made sure when the recording session was happening that everything was a go. In the case of Al Neil we left it up to him because he was a musician; he wasn't just a writer. And he probably would have liked it better if we just said "do this and do that." [laughter] Al might disagree with that. And as for the other recording—mine, *Oh See Can You Say*, I did a lot on some equipment I had.

BM: Your record seemed to be the most engineered and polished of them all—the cleanest.

JB: Well you see I was working directly with the two musicians Ross Barrett and Wayne Carr, and many of the things that are on my album are actually compositions by Wayne or Ross based on my spoken voice. And the way that was done was I would go in and read the poem onto a tape; they would take the voice and alter it, and only in a couple of instances am I actually reading live. There were tapes for me to read with at rock concerts where the background would be recorded for me. Sometimes I'd write part of the music, but basically the musicians would write the music. Mostly

the very good productions are actually compositions where they took my voice and treated it like an instrument, and I think there is a lot to be gained by that sort of thing; it isn't strictly, per se, poetry. It's going beyond, which is what I was trying to do. I was trying to go beyond it every way that I could for those years.

BM: We've got See/Hear productions with Barrett, and then you've got down here in your notes—"getting away from it."

JB: Talonbooks had been really struggling, as I say. After the meeting with Naim Kattan we had a trickle of money. And I went in January of '69—this could be the wrong date, but it was January of some year, I believe it was 1969—to Montreal. Victor Coleman and myself were invited to a meeting of Canadian publishers and I got there two days early to this big old hotel in Montreal, the Windsor hotel I think. I rattled around in there thinking, gawd, somebody's got to show up here sooner or later, and nobody did, so I went out and got the flavour of Montreal and it was a wonderful experience. I hadn't been able to get back east because I didn't have the dough, and so there I was. Finally the meeting happened. I went into the room and there were 14 or 16 individuals all in dark suits, with dark ties, white shirts and briefcases, and then there was this bearded guy sitting down at the end and I thought, that's got to be Victor. I went down and shook hands with him. I had a beard too and an old brown tweed jacket, and he said "let's get outta here." We went up to his room and got acquainted and went back down to the meeting and of course the way people shuffle paper back east it wasn't started yet; we didn't miss anything. We were given an opportunity to tell those 14 or 16 guys who were the guy from McClelland and Stewart, Ryerson, big presses in Canada no matter how commercial or non-commercial that they were, we were able to tell them why we thought we should get money, because they had their own dossiers already to tell the council what they should get, and they were surprised about how well prepared we were, to some extent. They expected a couple of spaced-out hippies and we were anything but that, even though we had long hair and beards. It was a pretty important meeting because at that meeting there was the big discussion: should bill bissett be given his fourth Canada Council grant and the 14 or 16 guys all said "no" because that would mean that bill bissett would become a welfare poet and it would be established that the Canada Council was basically funding poets who never had to be any good, that they could simply sluff off and collect their welfare.

BM: In bissett's case that kind of thinking shouldn't apply.

JB: Well no, but you see, these people not only probably hadn't read bill bissett, but if they had they would have been offended. He didn't fit into the eastern conception of publication, and so the thing that is really important about that meeting is that we were given as good and fair treatment as we could. The other issue that was mentioned, and it wasn't brought into play, was how should the money be allocated? We felt that it should be allocated to small presses to do what they wanted to do; if they were going to be granted so much money per book then the council should tell us how many books we could do and give us the money.

BM: And autonomy.

JB: Well, the question of autonomy was starting to come up. The other publishers were quite willing to submit their books to the Canada Council and if the Canada Council didn't want to fund this book or that book—they were large commercial operations and they could weather that. When it was suggested to us that we would have to submit our manuscripts to the Canada Council, and that someone on the Canada Council could say "no" we rebelled against that—probably tactfully because I don't remember there being any bare-knuckly situations or anything.

BM: It's quite simple. If you are the editor of the press, then you make editorial decisions about the manuscripts you solicit or receive. You can't send them to a peer group or people on a committee somewhere to make editorial decisions. But that's the way it finally worked out with the block-grant system. Maybe all that's changed now.

JB: You see, at that point I said that I did not want to accept money from the Canada Council that would create that situation, and I said that you've got to realize that there's a difference between our presses and these other presses. We have been doing these things without money, without monetary motive, whereas publication in the rest of Canada is tied to the dollar value and these people are probably going to publish these books anyway—we're going to publish them anyway, but the danger will be that small presses, and not my press or Victor's press, will start submitting manuscripts and only publishing the ones that are accepted by the Canada Council. Back in Vancouver, people who had heard about this meeting when I got back, had already become, as the Vancouver scene tends to, very very paranoid and schizophrenic about this. People said, *that's* what's *going* to happen. The Canada Council is going to become the editor for small presses—and it did happen. It happened to my press. I tooks a year's leave of absence in 1970. I went out to write a novel. I produced the novel, took it in. The press was cooking along. We had accepted the manuscript for

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, which was the first Talonbook that made money. My novel manuscript was submitted to the Canada Council, it was refused, and it was refused by Talonbooks.

BM: Your own publishing company!

JB: Yup. The two copies in existence, one in the Talonbooks file, and one in David Robinson's file, disappeared. The big falling out came over that issue. I said that it should be published because we had accepted it.

BM: So, you took this year off to write a novel...

JB: I accepted my book. [laughter] And David, as happened in the past, wasn't sure about it, but he had not been sure about other things. In fact I was as much the editor and he the publisher as you can get.

BM: It's too bad that wasn't clearer in the relationship. His literary judgement always seemed to depend on some other person's judgement.

JB: That's a bit harsh. His taste in things differed somewhat from mine. He published people like Helene Rosenthal and John Hulcoop, who had been contributors to *Talon* and definitely were writing poetry, but I didn't feel that they were part of what I could call the main thrust of poetry in Vancouver.

BM: Let me be clear on this. I think that what started with you, the connection with Belford, Phillips, bpNichol and others—a particular group who were, who could have been, in the same way that Coach House has its list of writers, Talonbook's writers—that those were the ones you support and publish.

JB: But you see, David had his own conception of Talonbooks and, as I say, we tended to do one for you and one for me. I would say, "well we *have* to do this book," and he would say, "we *have* to do this book," and for a long time that worked. I think it worked through the 60s. When it came to my novel manuscript I had submitted a rough draft. Why not? We were told that we could submit outlines to the Canada Council. Well, they rejected this. They said, "this isn't finished work." Well, it wasn't a rough draft. I was working on it. Anyway, somehow in the confusion, that novel got lost. I no longer had a copy of it—and we'll leave that for a minute because we want to stay chronological—but that has a play in the sourness that has developed between myself and the company that I founded. Anyway, at this point, *By the Light of the Silvery McLune* had been

produced by Lionel Kearns and we agreed to do a thing like Very Stone House had done—put our imprint on the inside of it, and help him distribute it. We'd done that with Pierre Coupey. At that point we were pushing *Moving Through the Mystery*, by Peter Trower and Jack Wise, which cost a lot of money. It sold well, but not well enough. We had a debt. We were struggling with a debt at this time and I was off taking my sabbatical. David had taken one. And I figured that I could do that but what I didn't realize was that there was probably a hell of a lot of work going on at Talonbooks and I wasn't doing any of it. I still wanted to be the editor—and you can't do that. I'm not saying that I was right—to look back on it. Also the girl who had been doing all of my typing, she and I broke up, and she was still part of Talonbooks. I think I got weaned away from it. It didn't need me and I didn't need it. The last book that I accepted for publication was *Still Water* by bp Nichol, and as you know, it did the best that you can do in Canadian poetry. It might have been the first fringe press group that won the Governor General's Award. I accepted that manuscript out here after a reading at SFU. Barrie showed it to me and I said, "right—well I guess you don't want us to do any editing on it." It has very few words in it, it's pages in a box. David really liked that project. I think that David did recognize some of the stuff. It's just that I don't think he recognized what was, like you say, the stable of Talon writers who were going to be writing and continuing to get better and better.

Also David had always been involved with drama. It was totally up to David to get *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and I think he had to do some footwork to get it. It was the best thing that he or anybody ever did in terms of money for Talonbooks. All of a sudden Talonbooks had a seller. We did a James Reaney play and it didn't do what the George Ryga play did. It cost a lot of money and James Reaney is a good writer, but it didn't work the magic and the money. So my book comes back rejected by the Canada Council and I take a hard line on it. Well if that is *it* then I'm not the editor, David, and you're not the editor; some anonymous writer employed by the Canada Council—in fact it could be Michael Yates, it could be Irving Layton, it could be Fred Cogswell—we don't know who it is. We know somebody in the writing community has said no, and if we don't produce this book, that's it. THAT was my issue. We don't produce this book, THAT'S IT. And at the same time, as a writer I realize that if I—well it's a danger you could run into in your life if you stay too close to that group of people who are all writing and publishing—that you don't do anything else, so that you don't have anything to write about ultimately. Because I wanted to write prose I felt that I needed to get out there somehow, and so I allowed myself to be weaned away from Talonbooks. I see Talonbooks from 1967 to 1971 as being a poetry publishing company. I see Talonbooks from that period on as being mainly a play and a general publishing company.

It's done very well for Canada in play publishing, but it represented a change in spirit from the original conception. The original conception was along the line of Very Stone House—to produce books by new poets and give them their start in life, and the difficulty with that is that you can't make money doing it. David has done well in choosing certain books that he's produced. One good thing about Talonbooks is that they've continued to publish bill bissett. I've got *plutonium missing* at home. I've got 2 or 3 books by bill that I thought they did a pretty good job on.

BM: No doubt about it. They started to match that kind of Coach House Press quality.

JB: Talonbooks was a catalyst idea that David and I had, and made into a publishing house and struggled through the difficulties of that. I didn't. I was lucky. I wanted to be a writer and in a way you can even look at it as a cop-out on my part because it was all very easy for me to say, "well, if the Canada Council was the editor, I don't want any part of this." It would have been harder for me to stay there and do something with it.

The next phase in my involvement with publishing in Vancouver is that I managed to feed a few projects through the Talonbook's mill. I got a project that was produced as loose pages in a batik bag called *The Mission Fair Book*, which was the most different book that I ever edited. I insisted that they finish *West Coast Seen*, which was being put on a back burner to some extent. At one point it wasn't being distributed. It was sitting printed. I went down to that place they had below Hastings Street and I said, "well, how come *West Coast Seen* isn't in the bookstores?" And he said, "we've got boxes of them. We can't see it." And I said, "but it's the most important anthology to ever come out of the west coast, the only real anthology of west coast poetry," and for some reason, through some committee decision or something, it wasn't being distributed very well. *West Coast Seen* is basically a giant issue of Talon, but it's like a collection. We took the best poems by each person and put them all together whether they'd been published here, there, or anywhere. The *Still Water* production was definitely produced after I was a force—it was something that I had accepted. I did that book called *Some Useful Wild Plants*, edited by Dan and Nancy Jason and illustrated by Robert Inwood, who is an important illustrator. David liked that project; it's quite different and it's certainly not poetry. Around then it got to be emotionally impossible to associate. I had a Scottish temper and when things weren't happening I would unleash it and it's not a good thing to bring into business—so I have my own faults. My next publishing venture was Blue Mountain Books. I had the books printed at Intermedia. The goal was to produce 5 books of Canadian Literature and to qualify for a grant so that I

could start my own little press. There again it would have been a hobby publishing house. I no longer had the energy to do what David is doing or used to do. It's a hell of a lot of work.

BM: I hear David is publishing cookbooks now.

JB: Well you know, maybe that's the evolution of small presses and somebody like Karl Siegler comes along and wants to get in there—and does a good job.

BM: It's common with small presses that there is a short life-span, whether it's one year or 10 or 15.

JB: But with Talon books that hasn't happened to it and that's probably been the best thing about it. People like Warren Tallman—Warren didn't espouse our poetic at all at Talon, but he was always a supporter. When they had legal problems...it was for bill bissett and Talonbooks—Warren organized a terrific set of readings. They had something like 1,200 people out to some of those readings and they had a band, which is to my way of thinking. A poetry reading should be fun. I remember going to bissett's reading and Ginsberg's and I saw the one with Victor and Barrie Nichol and bill, and that was pretty good. So Talonbooks in 1987, if it's still producing books, will have lasted for 20 years, and as the kindling spirit of Talonbooks I have to be proud, unquote! [laughter]

BM: I guess that's it for this interview! [laughter]

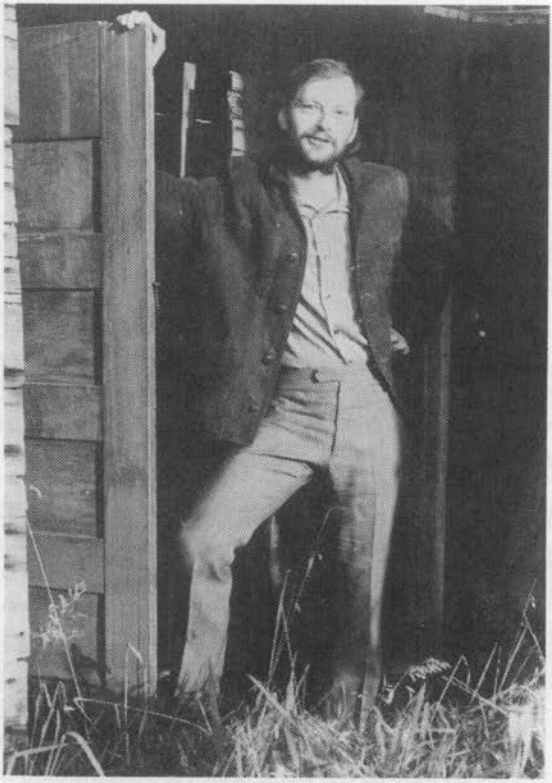
JB: Well Barry, I believe in the spirit of freedom. People who write poetry are not the kind of people who are about to be subjected to regimentation, and if the Canada Council died, something else would pop up and create a situation which would help writers in Canada. The reason for small presses is because the writer is not ready to produce something which is going to sell 100 thousand copies or even 10 thousand copies, or even 100 copies. The writer needs that—he needs to sow his wild oats. He needs to get out there and make mistakes and make successes, and I'd be willing to devote another 10 years of my life working with other small presses and probably will, just so there is a climate in Canada for writers to get a chance.

BM: Give them a chance.

JB: Why not? Somebody gave us our chances. It's important to note that Al Purdy and Earl Birney were major forces in helping young writers, and they supported us at every step of the way along the path, particularly them,

and lots of other people. And they wrote some damn fine poetry of their own, and when they weren't doing that they could have hogged the glory to themselves and they didn't, not as far as I ever sensed.

Just to end this, I'd like to mention the workers at Talonbooks in the early days: Judith Finch, Anne Cook, and Janie McElwie, the girls who bent, stapled, typed, and mailed things out. Gordon Fidler did our light shows, became our printer and put up with a lot of abuse. Gordon's photography and design also played a part. Arnold Saba, Gordon's partner in filmmaking and the *Majenta Frog* magazine which we printed. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson who supported us and at times let their house become our office and warehouse. Louis Atkinson and Francis Brown, my devoted typing ladies and personal source of inspiration. Sandra Cruickshank who married Ross Barrett and did a lot of the art work on my early books and covers for *Talon* magazine. Without these devoted helpers, David and I could not have done what we did.



Jim Brown, cover of *Toward a Chemistry of Reel People* (1971)

KARL SIEGLER

"Desperation Filters Up Through the Positions": Two Letters from the Talonbooks Archive

Tucked away in the massive archives of Talonbooks, dating back 20 years to its beginnings, are a pair of unique letters dating back to July 19, 1977. Filed as they are with other correspondence dealing with the day-by-day affairs of a busy literary press, they leap out of that mundane enclosure—first, as an instance of a moment in midstream when the pressure of inconsistency and contradiction occasioned the need to write; and secondly, as documents that reflect the tenuous ground of literary publishing in Canada some 10 years ago. Since Karl said yes to the request from *Line* to reprint these letters written to and from "Mr. Siegler," we visited him at his office on E. Cordova to have him recall what prompted him to speak to and about his various publishing selves.

Line: Karl, didn't you have something more important to do than write to yourself on that morning of July 19th?

KS: No. In fact writing to myself that way was the only thing I could have done that morning. Things had reached a certain kind of crisis level around the issues the letters discuss—actually had become absurd and Talonbooks was in deep trouble. We had to get these absurdities resolved if the press was to survive.

Line: It really seems as if you were on the verge of role suicide. Why not just stick to publishing literary books, period? Why get wrapped up in all those publishing associations?

KS: Yes, exactly. What I wanted those letters to portray was exactly that, a kind of public absurd role suicide. You can't in Canada "just publish literary books," for a variety of economic reasons that I can't go into in detail here. Basicially the Canadian book market is too small to sustain a publishing industry as long as our book prices are determined by our American competitors who work in a market twelve times the size of the Canadian English language book market—a market dominated at a level of

about 77% by foreign books, mostly American. I realized way back in 1974 when I joined Talonbooks as business manager that some form of government support was needed if Canadians were going to have their own books, authors and publishers. That's why I got heavily involved right from the beginning in these publishing associations. In fact, I co-founded two of them—the Literary Press Group (LPG) and the B.C. Publishers Group (BCPG) in 1974-75. I saw this as part of my job—i.e. to make the company as lean and as efficient as possible, and since that was not enough to sustain it, to work on an adequate cultural policy from both the federal and provincial governments, which would allow us to survive. Now, what was happening in 1977 was that the federal support programs in publishing had eroded since 1971 when they were started to the point that they were only providing about 50% of the total support needed by publishers to continue. This situation was exacerbated if you: a) published for a small specialized cultural market (literature for example) and b) were located outside the province of Ontario which at the time was the only English language province in Canada providing provincial support to publishers in addition to the federal support we were all receiving. Since the overwhelming majority of Canadian publishers were located in Ontario (82.5%), most of the members of the national association, the Association of Canadian Publishers (ACP), were not feeling the pinch as much as we were, publishing literature in B.C. That's why I co-founded the LPG and the BCPG—to draw attention to the fact that if somebody didn't do something about getting either provincial support to publishers outside Ontario or additional federal support to those publishers we wouldn't have any non-Ontario publishers left in the country, especially if they were specializing in things like literature.

Line: The title we've chosen for the letters was written by you in the corner of the first letter.

KS: Yes, well I wrote that in the corner after I finished the letters as a comment to myself about the whole exercise. You see, while my colleagues in the national association understood my rational arguments on the subjects of literary and regional publishing—that they were declining due to funding inequities—most of those colleagues were in Ontario, so the whole thing was just an abstract problem to them that they could ignore. So like all associations, if you want something done, you get a committee going and work on it. The only problem was I seemed to be the only one willing to take this problem seriously, so I did all the work on it in the national association. But instead of getting the national association to take this problem seriously and work on it with some solidarity, I ended up simply having this dialogue with myself as the guy at the national

association responsible for the type of problem plaguing my company. And it was getting totally absurd. So I wrote these letters and circulated them in the associations to point out to people how absurd the situation had become. And it did work—in a way that all my reasoned arguments had not. The ACP wrote briefs to the Canada Council, we got somewhat more effective regional and literary consideration, and in 1978 the Department of Communication (DOC) started doing things. Now I'm not saying these letters did all that, but they helped. People finally started taking these issues seriously.

Line: Has the situation changed? Are the contents of your letters no longer relevant—that is, properly now domiciled in the archive?

KS: No things haven't changed at all—in fact they've gotten worse. Now all English language provinces have some form of sophisticated program to assist publishers in their jurisdictions, except B.C. which is still largely ignoring us except for a few token gestures here and there. We've gotten around that for the last several years in a way by exploiting the DOC's program which is based on sales, with our cookbooks. But of course everybody realized the absurdity of that program and for 1987 the DOC program has changed and we're right back to where we were 10 years ago—it's almost unbelievable. I think the feds have gone as far as they can to make up for the province's incompetence and negligence. It's really up to B.C. now to finally get off its ass and do something for writing and publishing here.

Line: Nevertheless, we'd like to congratulate Talonbooks for 20 years of high quality publishing! Any reflections to share with our readers as you look back?

KS: Yes, we've been very very lucky for a number of reasons: we've always had very good people here—bright, idealistic and committed and so on. And although the terrible struggles of the past 20 years have really burned out a lot of those wonderful people, someone else has always come in to take up the torch so to speak. The other thing is that we've been bailed out three times in our history, at times when, no matter what we could have done, we were going down. Yeah, so it's been very brutal but someone or something has always shown up in the nick so to speak. But then those were the times too. We're talking about the 60s and 70s when idealism, commitment, sacrifice, culture, all those things, were writ very large. When I look down the road at the next 20 years, I don't see that happening again. But that doesn't mean I'm not looking forward to the next 20—it's always the writing that fascinates and I can't wait to see what our

authors are going to do next or what new authors are going to show up next—that's really what keeps you looking forward.

TALON BOOKS LTD.

201/1019 East Cordova, Vancouver, British Columbia
V6A, 1M8 (604) 255-5915

July 19, 1977
9:00 A.M.

Mr. Karl Siegler
Chairman, B.C. Publishers Group
1622 West 7th Ave.
Vancouver, B.C.

Dear Mr. Siegler:

I am writing to you formally on the matter of the survival of my company, because it seems that despite all of my verbal harangues over the past three years, no progress has been made either by the B.C.P.G., the L.P.G. [Literary Press Group], or the A.C.P. [Association of Canadian Publishers] to stem the tide of policies both in government and the private sector which are designed (probably consciously, since those policies have only escalated despite three years of fairly rational argument) to erode and ultimately phase out publishing centres in Canada which are not located in either Ontario or Quebec.

We have witnessed, over the last five years, a rapid multiplication of programs designed to assist publishers in these two provinces, over and above what is available to all Canadian publishers "equally" from the federal government. All of these programs were and are based mainly on the findings of the Ontario Royal Commission which studied the Canadian publishing industry ten years

ago. At that time, the Canadian publishing industry was the Ontario publishing industry almost exclusively (in the English language), a situation which no longer prevails. The Ontario Royal Commission identified three major reasons why the Canadian publishing industry was being eroded by the tide of publications flowing over our borders from the big competitor to the south.

1) Loss of the indigenous educational market.

2) Lack of access to capital (no grants, loans, interest subsidies or other forms of capital assistance).

3) Disadvantageous location in a much smaller market.

One of the major developments to emerge from this study was the I.P.A. [Independent Publishers Association], an association of publishers committed to turning the tide identified by the Royal Commission by working towards programs to assist the thus disadvantaged Canadian publishing industry.

My point is quite simple. Substantially the same situation now exists within the Canadian publishing industry when one considers the relation of Ontario publishers to those publishers based outside of Ontario, as the one identified by the Royal Commission ten years ago, having considered the relation of U.S. publishers to those publishers based outside of the U.S. (in Canada).

I presume that the B.C.P.G. is playing the role of the I.P.A. in this scenario, championing the interests of the B.C. publishing industry in our province and abroad. With one major twist--our "competitors" are, according to their own constitution, supposed to be on our side. That's why we all belong to the national organization now called the A.C.P. (formerly the I.P.A., remember

them) which is supposed to be looking after the interests of everyone, right? Wrong. The latest example of the A.C.P.'s disregard for the publishers in the hinterland is their executives' approval of the "new, improved" C.C. [Canada Council] Book Purchase Plan. Doesn't the A.C.P. realize that:

1) there was a motion passed at their annual general meeting designed specifically to prevent such a program from ever receiving any industry sancton, and

2) what the effects of such a program will be on publishers not based in the land where the milk and honey flows so fast into open mouths that the first thing mothers teach their children is how to swallow in double time so as to prevent themselves from drowning?

But then, to expect the A.C.P. to understand and remain vigilant concerning the problems in B.C. is like expecting the American Publishers Association to understand what those "radicals" in the I.P.A. (A.C.P.) have been raving about for years (or for that matter, the International Publishers Association understanding the A.C.P.'s problems--don't they still recognize the C.B.P.C.?).

You however, as chairman of the B.C.P.G., are obliged to understand me, one of your members. Specifically on the Book Purchase Plan, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that we have always relied on the money from book purchase to get out our Fall list (always late because payment is so damn slow). We do this because we have no other access to cash input than the Federal Block Grant and Book Purchase programs. No loans, no provincial grants, no operating credit, no promotion funds which could be temporarily diverted, nothin'. (Aside from sales, of course.) I.E. that's what we used to do. Last year, our book purchase money was used to pay off Spring '76

production, after which I bullshit our printers about an "impending loan guarantee program" which you assured us was in the works, and because I have an honest face they went ahead and printed our Fall list (most of our '76 list, in fact), and they didn't get their money until our 1977 Block Grant arrived. That wasn't even enough. We had to borrow some money on the short term from a bunch of loan sharks to pay off the rest. It's because I was trying to make the payment to the sharks that I couldn't attend the last round of meetings in my capacity as C.C. committee member to prevent the disaster from occurring in the Book Purchase plan.

So for us underfunded jerks in the boonies, the Book Purchase program is a vital and sensitive one. It's our only other "source". We can't abide any tampering with this program which will change it in such a way that we are no longer sure how much <u>if anything</u> is forthcoming in the Fall.

However, the Book Purchase thing is just another specific problem which adds to my realization that survival for our company in B.C. is a real and current problem. We have produced one 1977 title (CRUEL TEARS, which has a national run this year, so is mostly likely to make the most amount of money. Besides it's based on Othello, and is a C.W. musical, so it will appeal to all of our colonial, reverse racist, chauvinist, redneck tastes.) We don't have the capital to produce the other15 titles we are contractually committed to this year. July is almost over. We've got nowhere to go without some kind of provincial or whatever program. Why don't you get off your ass and <u>do</u> something. If I weren't you, I'd do something about it myself. But since I am you, I can't even make any pleas to anyone outside of yourself (whom I am) without getting into a conflict of interest situation.

Surely you must realize that as president of Talon Books Ltd., my primary responsibility lies with our

company and its authors, and when it comes to the crunch, I'm going to have to make you disappear by withdrawing membership in your association and striking out on my own (if you'll pardon the pun) with that great Canadian Mac & Stew option? (Which is nothing more than imported Horatio Alger with a "canned in Ontario" label anyway.)

What continues to amaze me is that the A.C.P. does not seem to be able to deal with the same situation in our own country, that gave rise to their association in the first place.

I expect a prompt answer to my pressing problems.

Respectfully,

Karl H. Siegler,
President, TALON BOOKS LTD.

---

british columbia publishers group
P.O. Box 48417, Station Bentall
Vancouver, B.C., Canada V7X 1A2
(604) 734-1611

July 19, 1977
11:00 A.M.

Mr. Karl Siegler
President, Talon Books Ltd.
201 - 1019 E. Cordova Street
Vancouver, B.C.

Dear Mr. Siegler:

Thank you for your letter of July 19th. I must say that it is the most insulting, paranoid, and arrogant letter I've ever received from any of our members. I will, nevertheless, try to respond to your more rational queries:

A) Current publishing policies in both the public and private sector do not consciously discriminate against publishers located outside of Ontario and Quebec. They are liberal policies, the one overriding characteristic of which is that they ignore the particular circumstances of any particular situation you might care to identify, in the interests of being inpeccably and abstractly FAIR in the context of the largest generality accessible to the minds of the policy makers. They thus only appear to be consciously discriminatory to the perceptions of those paranoids, like yourself, who have not the mental capacity to imagine the scope of the generalities being considered by those policy makers. However, whether those policies are consciously discriminatory or not, I accept your point that they are discriminatory and concede that something must be done about them. That's why I am the Chairman of the B.C.P.G., make no mistake about it!

B) Your comparison of the situation within Canada to the one which the Ontario Royal Commission identified constitutes argument by false analogy:

1) B.C. publishers never had access to the B.C. educational market in the first place.

2) If you, as a director of a B.C. pubishing house, have personal assets, you can mortgage them to the hilt to support your company. You can also, if you choose not to abide by the rules of our associations, try to apply for a whole range of "emergency grants", something which you yourself have done once successfully, right?

3) You don't have to stay in B.C., right? I mean you could either move or sell to Ontario, if the only concern you are entertaining is the survival of your company. You'd still be "Canadian", wouldn't you? You wouldn't even have to worry about F.I.R.A. [Foreign Investment Review Agency],

right? And just think, you could attend even more meetings with our "parent" organization, right? Maybe they'd even make you president? For behaving just like the B.M.C. [Bureau of Management Consultants] report says every good Canadian publisher should behave?

C) Your comparison of the functions of the B.C.P.G. to those of the I.P.A. is a little more to the point. May I remind you that I have spent the last three years as the B.C.P.G. government relations officer, and in those three years have submitted over 27 pounds of briefs to the departments of Economic Development, Education, and Recreation and Leisure Services? That in that time I have seen 8 cabinet ministers come and go, imported numerous industry and federal government experts to help argue our case, and have gotten absolutely nowhere? Now I know that physicists define "work" as the application of "force" to move a "mass" over a specific, measurable "distance", and by that definition I suppose I <u>have</u> been sitting on my ass for the past three years, accomplishing no "work" on your or anyone else's behalf in B.C. The only explanation I can offer is that perhaps N.D.P. and Socred governments constitute "masses" not subject to the conventional laws of physics. (As opposed to Liberal or Conservative governments which are, if anything, "conventional".)

D) On the matter of the "new improved" Book Purchase Program:

1) On the matter of the A.C.P. executive having apparently forgotten the motion made at the annual general meeting; I have already drawn this to their attention in my capacity as a C.C. committee representative, and since I am he and he is you, you already have that document in your possession.

2) Your second point, concerning the effect on cash flow this new program <u>might</u> have on publishers

disadvantageously located in Canada, has been clearly stated in your letter to me, so I will simply forward this document on to Mr. Siegler, the provincial policy co-ordinator of the A.C.P., for his consideration. (Along with several other letters from B.C. publishers, both members and non-members of the B.C.P.G., on similar topics.)

E) Details of your internal management problems, and the fact that they prevent you from attending important meetings are hardly my concern, unless you can demonstrate that like strikes, acts of God, or parliament, they are caused by factors outside of your control. Since I feel you have done so, I can now go to my last point.

F) I have asked Sally Bryer to request of the A.C.P. that they send Harald Bohne out to B.C. to meet with the Honourable Sam Bawlf, minister responsible for cultural affairs in this province, to argue the case for your particular company. You quite rightly state that I cannot argue your case without creating a conflict of interest. I must remind you however, that as chairman of the B.C.P.G., I will only allow Mr. Bohne to use your company in an exemplary fashion, and will not allow him to plead for any special concessions for your company alone. I will continue to act in such a fashion until you have made me disappear by withdrawing your company's membership from the B.C.P.G. That meeting will take place on August 22nd, so hang tough. (Just as an afterthought, why don't you sell out to Ontario before that? Then we can all safely point to you like we did to Gage and Ryerson 10 years ago and say, "SEE?" That would be much better for the interests of the group on the whole, in the long run.)

In closing, please let me say that I do not appreciate the slanderous aspersions you cast in your letter on our parent, the A.C.P. That organization has, after all, decided to give priority this year to provincial matters such as

yours, and appointed Mr. Siegler to be in charge of such affairs, to whom, incidentally, I am referring all of this correspondence.

Best regards,

Karl H. Siegler
Chairman, B.C.P.B.

Cover, Talonbooks catalogue, 1975; photo for *The Evelyn Roth Recycling Book.*

TWENTY YEARS OF TALONBOOKS

A Bibliography: 1967 - 1986

Compiled by Jean Cockburn and Mary Schendlinger

All books from *Two police poems*, *The man whose path was on fire*, and *Colours in the dark* in 1969, through to *Walsh* in 1973, were printed on Talonbooks' Addressograph-Multigraph 350 press, with these exceptions: the covers for *Crabdance*, *Listen to the wind*, *Rinse cycle*, and *Parking lots* in 1972; and *Apple butter*, *Songs my mother taught me*, and the cover for *The Clallam* in 1973. Talonbooks' Zenith 25 press was used for the entire 1974-75 production except for *Blown figures* and the cover for *Hosanna* in 1974; and *The Evelyn Roth recycling book* and the covers for *En pièces detachées*, *Mrs. Blood*, *transcanadaletters*, *Lulu Street*, *Fifteen miles of broken glass*, *Jacob's wake*, *Bonjour, là, bonjour*, *Three plays*, *Tish No. 1–19*. All of the books printed on Talonbooks' press were done by Gordon Fidler. The last book he printed was *Grounds* in 1976, although by that time most of the production was sent out to be done.

Unless otherwise noted, the books were printed in black ink on white paper, and perfect bound in quality paperback. Where format specifications are not indicated for successive printings, they are the same as for the first printing.

---

* 1967 *

Belford, Ken. *Fireweed.*
Poetry. Stapled, dust cover. Yellow paper. Unpaged, 15 x 22 cm.

Brown, Jim. *If there are any Noahs.*
Poetry. Etchings by Sandra Crickshank. Stapled, dust cover. Coloured and black and white illustrations. Unpaged, 17 x 23 cm.

Coupey, Pierre. *Circle without center.*
Poetry and collage. Black and white illustrations. Unpaged, 13 x 20 cm.

* 1968 *

bissett bill. *Awake in th red desert.*
Poetry. Record and book. Book: Green and white paper. Black and white illustrations. Unpaged, 18 x 25 cm. Record: 12 in. stereo LP. Joint publication of Talonbooks and See/Hear Productions.

Hulcoop, John. *Three ring circus songs.*
Poetry. Black and white photographs. Dust jacket. Purple paper. Black and white photos. 86 p., 17 x 25 cm.

Rosenthal, Helene. *Peace is an unknown continent.* Poetry. 70 p., 17 x 25 cm.

* 1969 *

Bowering, George. *Two police poems.*
Poetry. Stapled. Red and blue ink. Unpaged, 12 x 15 cm.

Brown, Jim. *Forgetting.*
Poetry. Stapled. Heavy, grey paper. Unpaged, 17 x 26 cm.

Brown, Jim. *O see can u say.*
Poetry. Record and book. Book: folded sheets stapled at one corner. Yellow paper. Unpaged, 21 x 36 cm. Record: 12 in. stereo LP. Joint publication of Talonbooks and See/Hear Productions.

Brown, Jim and David Phillips, eds. *West coast seen.*
Poetry anthology. Green paper. 212 p., 21 x 28 cm. Original title: *West coast 68.*

Kearns, Lionel. *By the light of the silvery McLune: media parables, poems, signs, gestures, and other assaults on the interface.*
Poetry. Hard cover and paper bound. Hard cover has dust jacket. 80 p., 14 x 23 cm. Paper bound: 13 x 21 cm. Joint Publication of Talonbooks and Daylight Press.

Reaney, James. *Colours in the dark.*
Drama. First three printings jointly with the Macmillan Company of Canada. Green paper. 90 p., 13 x 21 cm. 2nd and 3rd printings: 92 p. 4th printing Talonbooks alone: white paper. 127 p.

Reid, Jamie. *The man whose path was on fire.*
Poetry. Beige paper. 43 p., 15 x 23 cm. Errata slip with 16 corrections.

Trower, Peter. *Moving through the mystery.*
Poetry. Drawings by Jack Wise. Hard cover and paper bound. Hard cover has dust jacket. Unpaged, 25 x 25 cm. Paper bound: same as hard cover.

* 1970 *

Belford, Ken. *The post electric cave man.*
Poetry. Recycled grey paper. Unpaged, 14 x 22 cm. Released Spring 1971.

Davey, Frank. *Four myths for Sam Perry.*
Poetry. Green paper, green and orange ink. Unpaged, 15 x 23 cm. Released Spring 1971.

Nichol, bp. *Still water.*
Poetry. Book in a box. Black box, silver mylar cover. Unpaged, 13 x 13 x 1 cm. Look of Books Design Award.

Phillips, David. *Wave.*
Poetry. Grey paper, blue and green ink. Unpaged, 15 x 23 cm. Original title: *Sea wall.*

Ryga, George. *The ecstasy of Rita Joe.*
Drama. First six printings: 90 p., 13 x 21 cm. 7th printing: 122 p., 15 x 22 cm. Subsequent printings: 126 p., 13 x 21 cm.

* 1971 *

bissett, bill. *Drifting into war.*
Poetry. Blue, black, and pink ink. Unpaged, 16 x 21 cm.

Brown, Jim. *Chemical change.*
Poetry. Stapled. Yellow paper, green ink. Unpaged, 14 x 21 cm.

Brown, Jim. *Toward a chemistry of reel people.*
Poetry. Yellow paper. Unpaged, 16 x 23 cm.

Gardiner, Dwight. *A book of occasional.*
Poetry. Dust cover. Grey paper. Unpaged, 14 x 15 cm. Released Spring 1972.

Geddes, Gary. *Rivers inlet.*
Poetry. Hard cover. Black and white photos. Unpaged, 14 x 16 cm. Released Spring 1972.

Jason, Dan and Nancy, with Dave Manning. *Some useful wild plants.*
Non-fiction. Illustrations by Robert Inwood. 2 editions. 1st edition: 2 printings. Yellow paper, brown line drawings. 83 p., 12 x 18 cm. 2nd edition, revised and enlarged: 5 printings; 4 printings, 174 p.; 5th printing, 180 p.

McKinnon, Barry. *The carcasses of spring.*
Poetry. Brown paper. Unpaged, 15 x 22 cm.

Nichol, bp. *Monotones.*
Poetry. Cream paper, red ink. Black and white photos. Unpaged, 16 x 12 cm.

Pass, John. *Taking place.*
Poetry. Blue and green ink. Unpaged, 14 x 15 cm. Released Spring 1972.

Phillips, David. *The coherence.*
Poetry. 2 editions. 1st edition: 2 printings. 1st printing: Stapled. Recycled paper. Unpaged, 13 x 19 cm. This printing never released. 2nd printing: Unpaged, 14 x 22 cm. 2nd edition: Yellow paper. Unpaged, 16 x 24 cm.

Rosenberg, David. *Paris and London.*
Poetry. Pink paper, red and grey ink. Illustrations. Cover designed and printed by Coach House Press, Toronto. Unpaged, 17 x 22 cm.

Ryga, George. *Captives of the faceless drummer.*
Drama. 2 editions. 1st edition: 78 p., 13 x 21 cm. 2nd edition: 2 printings. 1st printing: added material, preface and appendices, 117 p. 2nd printing, revised June 1974, 119 p.

Stevens, Peter. *A few myths.*
Poetry. Orange paper, brown ink. Drawings. Unpaged, 16 x 23 cm.

Walker, Doug. *Forehead nite.*
Poetry. Stapled. Green paper. Unpaged, 15 x 21 cm.

Webb, Phyllis. *Selected poems 1954-1965.*
Edited with an introduction by John Hulcoop.
Poetry. 3 printings. 1st printing: Hard cover. 2nd printing: paperbound with dust jacket. 3rd printing: paperbound. 1st and 2nd printings: unpaged, 16 x 24 cm. 3rd printing: 130 p., 15 x 22 cm.

* 1972 *

Coleman, Victor. *Parking lots.*
Poetry. Illustrations. Cover by Coach House Press, Toronto. Unpaged, 22 x 16 cm. Look of Books Design Award.

Crossland, Jackie and Rudy Lavalle. *Rinse cycle.*
Drama. Unpaged, 15 x 23 cm. Released Spring 1973.

Davey, Frank. *King of swords.*
Poetry. Dust jacket. Unpaged, 11 x 17 cm. Reprinted May 1973 with an errata slip.

Piffer, Phil. *The air I dance thru.*
Poetry. Grey and black ink. Unpaged, 16 x 23 cm. Released Spring 1973.

Rosenthal, Helene. *A shape of fire.*
Poetry. Black and white photos. Unpaged, 12 x 28 cm. Released Spring 1973.

Reaney, James. *Listen to the wind.*
Drama. 2 editions. 1st edition: 2 printings. Dust jacket. Beige paper. 119 p., 14 x 21 cm. 2nd printing: no dust jacket. 2nd edition: no dust jacket. 142 p.

Simons, Beverley. *Crabdance.*
Drama. 3 printings. 1st printing: revised from In Press edition. 103 p., 13 x 21 cm. 2nd printing: 119 p. 3rd printing: 122 p.

Stevenson, Sharon. *Stone.*
Poetry. Dust jacket. Grey paper. Unpaged, 15 x 23 cm. Released Spring 1973.

Watmough, David. *Ashes for Easter and other monodramas.*
Drama. Dust jacket. 182 p., 14 x 21 cm. Released Spring 1973.

* 1973 *

Barbour, Douglas. *Songbook.*
Poetry. Blue and pink ink. Unpaged, 16 x 22 cm.

bissett, bill. *Pass th food, release th spirit book.*
Poetry. Drawings by bill bissett. Unpaged, 20 x 26 cm.

Davey, Frank. *The Clallam.*
Poetry. Cover printed by C. Hurst at A Space, Toronto. Unpaged, 19 x 15 cm.

Geddes, Gary. *Snakeroot.*
Poetry. Black and white photos by Gary Geddes. Unpaged, 25 x 20 cm.

Hardin, Herschel. *Esker Mike and his wife, Agiluk.*
Drama. 86 p., 14 x 22 cm. 2nd and 3rd printings: 90 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Lachance, Bertrand. *Cock tales.*
Poetry. Blue ink. Unpaged, 13 x 21 cm.

Pollock, Sharon. *Walsh.*
Drama. 112 p., 15 x 22 cm. 2nd and 3rd printings: 116 p. Revised edition (1983): 129 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Reaney, James. *Apple butter and other plays for children.*
Drama. Yellow paper, brown ink. 193 p., 21 x 28 cm.

Robinson, J. Lewis and Walter G. Hardwick. *British Columbia: one hundred years of geographical change.*
Non-fiction. Cartography by Karen Ewing. 62 p., 27 x 21 cm.

Ryga, George. *Sunrise on Sarah.*
Drama. Stapled. 73 p., 15 x 22 cm.

Scobie, Stephen. *Stone poems.*
Poetry. Book in a box. Unpaged, 13 x 13 x 1 cm. Released Summer 1974.

Thomas, Audrey. *Songs my mother taught me.*
Fiction. Hard cover and paper bound. Cream paper, brown ink. 232 p., 15 x 20 cm. 2nd printing: Mass market paperback, 206 p.

Bowering, George. *At war with the U.S.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 15 x 15 cm.

Bowering, George. *Imago 20.*
Poetry magazine. 100 p., 18 x 29 cm.

Brissenden, Connie. *The Factory Lab anthology.*
Drama. Newsprint paper. 316 p., 19 x 25 cm.

Bromige, David. *Spells and blessings.*
Poetry. Stapled. Unpaged, 13 x 21 cm.

Coleman, Victor. *Speech sucks.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 21 x 23 cm.

Freeman, David. *Battering ram.*
Drama. 110 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Freeman, David. *You're gonna be alright Jamie boy.*
Drama. 138 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Gilbert, Gerry. *Skies.*
Poetry. Drawings and collage. Unpaged, 21 x 27 cm.

Gurik, Robert. *API 2967.*
Translated by Marc F. Gelinas.
Drama. 74 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Gurik, Robert. *The trial of Jean-Baptiste M.*
Translated by Allan Van Meer.
Drama. 125 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Marlatt, Daphne and Robert Minden. *Steveston.*
Poetry and photographs. 89 p., 20 x 23 cm.

Nichol, bp. *Love: a book of remembrances.*
Poetry. Black and white drawings by bpNichol. Unpaged, 15 x 22 cm.

Ryga, George. *Hungry hills.*
Fiction. Hard cover and paper bound. Dust jackets.
2nd edition: mass market paperback, 163 p.

Stanley, George. *The stick.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 15 x 22 cm.

Thomas, Audrey. *Blown figures.*
Fiction. Hard cover and paper bound. 547 p., 15 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Les belles soeurs.*
Translated by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco. Drama. 114 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Hosanna.*
Translated by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco.
Drama. Black and white photographs. 102 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Watson, Scott. *Stories.*
Fiction. 49 p., 17 x 22 cm.

* 1975 *

Cook, Michael. *Jacob's wake.*
Drama. 141 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Davey, Frank, ed. *Tish No. 1-19.*
Poetry magazine reprint. 433 p., 15 x 23 cm.

Gold, Artie. *Even yr photograph looks afraid of me.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 15 x 23 cm.

Hendry, Tom. *Fifteen miles of broken glass.*
Drama. 127 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Henry, Ann. *Lulu Street.*
Drama. 132 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Kiyooka, Roy. *transcanadaletters.*
Correspondence. Black and white photos. Unpaged, 22 x 28 cm.

Langley, Rod. *Bethune.*
Drama. 152 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Nicol, Eric. *Three plays by Eric Nicol.*
Drama. 229 p., 21 x 28 cm.

Roth, Evelyn. *The Evelyn Roth recycling book.*
Non-fiction. 76 p., 28 x 21 cm.

Rule, Jane. *Theme for diverse instruments.*
Fiction. 185 p., 15 x 20 cm.

Simons, Beverley. *Preparing.*
Drama. Black and white photographs. 127 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Thomas Audrey. *Mrs. Blood.*
Fiction. 220 p., 15 x 23 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Bonjour, là, bonjour.*
Translated by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco.
Drama. 93 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Forever yours Marie-Lou.*
Translated by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco.
Drama. 86 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *En pièces détachées.*
Translated by Allan Van Meer.
Drama. 111 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Wah, Fred. *Pictograms from the interior of B.C.*
Poetry. 42 p., 21 x 17 cm.

* 1976 *

Blais, Marie-Claire. *Dürer's angel.*
Translated by David Lobdell.
Fiction. 105 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Blais, Marie-Claire. *The execution.*
Translated by David Lobdell.
Drama. 103 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Cook, Michael. *Tiln and other plays.*
Drama. 111 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Dorn, Ed. *The poet, the people, the spirit.*
Poetry lecture. Stapled. Brown paper. 29 p., 15 x 23 cm.

Fennario, David. *On the job.*
Drama. 110 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Gifford, Barry. *The boy you have always loved.*
Poetry. Cream paper, brown ink. 70 p., 15 x 23 cm.

Gilbert, Gerry. *Grounds.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 15 x 23 cm.

Hardin, Herschel. *Great wave of civilization.*
Drama. 121 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Hay, Julius. *Have.*
Translated by Peter Hay.
Drama. 137 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Herbert, John. *Some angry summer songs.*
Drama. 103 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Lambert, Betty. *Sqrieux-de-Dieu.*
Drama. 122 p., 14 x 21 cm.

McNaughton, Duncan. *A passage of Saint Devil/Una passaggia di San Diabolo.*
Poetry. Cream paper. Unpaged, 16 x 24 cm.

Persky, Stan. *Wrestling the angel.*
Poetry. 183 p., 13 x 20 cm.

Ryga, George. *Ballad of a stonepicker.*
Fiction. Mass market paperback. 142 p.

Ryga, George. *Night desk.*
Fiction. Mass market paperback. 123 p.

Tremblay, Michel. *La Duchesse de Langeais and other plays.*
Translated by John Van Burek.
Drama. 125 p., 14 x 21 cm.

bissett, bill. *Pomes for Yoshi.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 14 x 21 cm.

Bowering, George. *A short sad book.*
Fiction. 191 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Fawcett, Brian. *Creatures of state.*
Poetry. Cream paper. 126 p., 13 x 20 cm.

Fennario, David. *Nothing to lose.*
Drama. 144 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Findley, Timothy. *Can you see me yet?*
Drama. 176 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Hopkins, Elisabeth Margaret. *The painted cougar.*
Children's book. Hard cover. Full page illustrations, coloured, by author.
Unpaged, 22 x 28 cm.

Mitchell, Ken and Humphrey and the Dumptrucks. *Cruel tears.*
Drama. Black and white photographs. 145 p., 14 x 21 cm.

O'Hagan, Howard. *The school-marm tree.*
Fiction. 245 p., 14 x 21 cm.

O'Hagan, Howard. *The woman who got on at Jasper Station and other stories.*
Fiction. 132 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Sonnets to Orpheus.*
Translated by Karl Siegler.
Poetry. Unpaged, 14 x 21 cm.

Rule, Jane. *Desert of the heart.*
Fiction. Mass market paperback. 251 p.

Ryga, George. *Ploughmen of the glacier.*
Drama. 80 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Ryga, George. *Seven hours to sundown.*
Drama. 112 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Salutin, Rick. *Les Canadiens.* Assist: Ken Dryden.
Drama. Black and white photographs. 194 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Woodcock, George. *Two plays.*
Drama. 112 p., 14 x 21 cm.

* 1978 *

Baker, Jane Howard. *A teacher's guide to theatre for the young.*
Non-fiction. 80 p., 14 x 21 cm.

bissett, bill. *Sailor.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 14 x 21 cm.

Bruyere, Christian. *Walls.*
Drama. 136 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Deverell, Rex. *Boiler room suite.*
Drama. 96 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Doolittle, Joyce and Zina Barnieh. *A mirror of our dreams.*
Non-Fiction. 224 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Foon, Dennis. *Heracles.*
Drama (Children's). 48 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Foon, Dennis. *Raft baby.*
Drama (Children's). 48 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Foon, Dennis. *The Windigo.*
Drama (Children's). 48 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Hill-Tout, Charles. *The Salish People.*
Edited by Ralph Maud.
Non-fiction. Four volumes: Vol. I: 167 p., 14 x 21 cm. Vol. II: 163 p., 14 x 21 cm. Vol. III: 165 p., 14 x 21 cm. Vol. IV: 181 p., 14 x 21 cm.

O'Hagan, Howard. *Wilderness men.*
Fiction. 192 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Reaney, James. *Apple butter.*
Drama (Children's). 48 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Reaney, James. *Geography match.*
Drama (Children's). 72 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Reaney. James. *Ignoramus.*
Drama (Children's). 72 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Reaney, James. *Names and nicknames.*
Drama (Children's). 48 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Rudkin, David. *Ashes.*
Drama. 104 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Watts, Irene. *A chain of words.*
Drama (Children's). 48 p., 14 x 21cm.

Wiesenfeld, Joe. *Spratt.*
Drama. 112 p., 14 x 21 cm.

* 1979 *

Butts, Mary. *Imaginary letters.*
Fiction. Afterword by Robin Blaser; drawings by Jean Cocteau. 80 p., 13 x 21 cm.

hagarty, britt. *Prisoner of desire.*
Fiction. 296 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Horovitz, Israel. *Mackerel.*
Drama. 128 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Horovitz, Israel. *The primary English class.*
Drama. 160 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Mitchell, Ken. *The con man.*
Fiction. 224 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Shepard, Sam. *Angel city, curse of the starving class & other plays.*
Drama. 246 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Shepard, Sam. *Buried child & other plays.*
Drama. 164 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Thomas, Audrey. *Latakia.*
Fiction. 172 p., 14 x 21 cm.

* 1980 *

bissett, bill. *Selected poems: beyond even faithful legends.*
Introduction by Len Early.
Poetry. 160 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Bowering, George. *Selected poems: particular accidents.*
Edited with an Introduction by Robin Blaser.
Poetry. 160 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Charlebois, Gaëtan. *Aléola.*
Drama. 112 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Chudley, Ron. *After Abraham.*
Drama. 112 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Davey, Frank. *Selected poems: the arches.*
Edited with an Introduction by bpNichol.
Poetry. 112 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Fennario, David. *Balconville.*
Drama. 128 p., 13 x 21 cm.

French, David. *Jitters.*
Drama. 144 p., 13 x 21 cm. Revised edition (1986): 175 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Griffiths, Linda. *Maggie & Pierre.*
Drama. 99 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Hulme, George. *The Lionel touch.*
Drama. 136 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Marlatt, Daphne. *Selected writing: net work.*
Edited with an Introduction by Fred Wah.
Poetry. 144 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Mendelson, Susan. *Mama never cooked like this.*
Non-fiction. Cerlox-bound paper, 128 p., 15 x 22 cm.

Murrell, John. *Waiting for the parade.*
Drama. 101 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Nichol, bp. *Selected writing: as elected.*
Edited with an Introduction by Jack David.
Poetry. 144 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Nichol, James W. *Saint-Marie among the Hurons.*
Drama. 80 p., 13 x 21 cm.

Wah, Fred. *Selected poems: Loki is buried at Smoky Creek.*
Edited with an Introduction by George Bowering.
Poetry. 128 p., 13 x 21 cm.

* 1981 *

bissett, bill. *Northern birds in color.*
Poetry. Unpaged, 14 x 21 cm.

Brown, Lennox. *The twilight dinner & other plays.*
Drama. 128 p., 14 x 21 cm.

hagarty, britt. *Sad paradise.*
Fiction. 320 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Meigs, Mary. *Lily Briscoe: a self-portrait.*
Non-Fiction. 264 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Thomas, Audrey. *Real mothers.*
Fiction. 176 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Damnée manon, sacrée Sandra.*
Translated by John Van Burek.
Drama. 48 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *The fat woman next door is pregnant.*
Translated by Sheila Fischman.
Fiction. 256 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *The impromptu of Outremont.*
Translated by John Van Burek.
Drama. 88 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Sainte-Carmen of the main.*
Translated by John Van Burek.
Drama. 80 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Wah, Fred. *Breathin' my name with a sigh.*
Poetry. 88 p., 14 x 21 cm.

* 1982 *

Boucher, Denise. *The fairies are thirsty.*
Translated by Alan Brown.
Drama. 72 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Fawcett, Brian. *Aggressive transport.*
Poetry. 136 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Fawcett, Brian. *My career with the Leafs & other stories.*
Fiction. 192 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Garrard, Jim. *Cold comfort.*
Drama. 96 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Gray, John with Eric Peterson. *Billy Bishop goes to war.*
Drama. 104 p., 14 x 21 cm. Winner of the 1982 Governor-General's Award for Drama.

Maud, Ralph. *A guide to B.C. Indian myth and legend.*
Non-fiction. 218 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Menghi, Umberto with John Bishop and Marian Babchuk. *The Umberto Menghi cookbook.*
Non-fiction. Cerlox-bound paper, 192 p., 17 x 25 cm.

Webb, Phyllis. *Selected poems: the vision tree.*
Edited with an Introduction by Sharon Thesen.
Poetry. 160 p., 13 x 21 cm. Winner of the 1982 Governor-General's Award for Poetry.

* 1983 *

bissett, bill. *Seagull on Yonge Street.*
Poetry. Drawings by bill bissett. 136 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Blaser, Robin. *Syntax.*
Poetry. 48 p., 13 x 21 cm.

hagarty, britt. *The day the world turned blue.*
Non-fiction. Black and white photographs. 264 p., 15 x 22 cm.

Kennedy, Dorothy and Randy Bouchard. *Sliammon life, Sliammon lands.*
Non-fiction. 176 p., 22 x 22 cm.

Marchessault, Jovette. *Saga of the wet hens.*
Translated by Linda Gaboriau.
Black and white photographs. Drama. 136 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Meigs, Mary. *The Medusa head.*
Non-fiction. 162 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Robinson, J. Lewis. *Concepts and themes in the regional geography of Canada.*
Non-fiction. 342 p., 15 x 22 cm.

Robinson, J. Lewis. *The physical environment of Canada and the evolution of settlement patterns*
Non-fiction. 48 p., 15 x 22 cm.

Schermbrucker, Bill. *Chameleon & other stories.*
Fiction. 160 p., 14 x 21 cm.

* 1984 *

Arnason, David. *The circus performers' bar.*
Fiction. 160 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Davey, Frank. *Margaret Atwood: a feminist poetics.*
Non-Fiction. 178 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Fawcett, Brian. *Capital tales.*
Fiction. 204 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Gardiner, Dwight. *The New York book of the dead & other poems.*
Poetry. 54 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Jamieson, Ian R. *Triple 'O' seven.*
Fiction. 216 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Mundwiler, Leslie. *Michael Ondaatje: word, image, imagination.*
Non-fiction. 160 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Scobie, Stephen. *bpNichol: what history teaches.*
Non-fiction. 154 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Remember me.*
Translated by John Stowe.
Drama. 64 p., 14 x 21 cm.

* 1985 *

bissett, bill. *Canada gees mate for life.*
Poetry. 128 p., 15 x 22 cm.

Fawcett, Brian. *The secret journal of Alexander Mackenzie.*
Fiction. 206 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Glick, Judie and Fiona McLeod. *The Granville Island Market cookbook.*
Non-fiction. 192 p., 17 x 25 cm.

Glover, Douglas. *Dog attempts to drown man in Saskatoon.*
Fiction. 126 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Kitagawa, Muriel. *This is my own: letters to Wes & other writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948.*
Edited with an Introduction by Roy Miki.
Non-fiction. Black and white photographs. Hard cover and paper bound. Hard cover has dust jacket. 302 p.,
15 x 22 cm. Released in February 1986.

Lill, Wendy. *The fighting days.*
Drama. 96 p., 14 x 21 cm.

McClure, Michael. *Specks.*
Poetry. 92 p., 13 x 20 cm.

Ryga, George. *In the shadow of the vulture.*
Fiction. 283 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Wasserman, Jerry, ed. *Modern Canadian plays.*
Drama. 412 p., 25 x 30 cm. Revised in 1986.

* 1986 *

Blaser, Robin and Dunham, Robert, eds. *Art and reality: a casebook of concern.*
Non-fiction. 240 p., 15 x 22 cm.

de Barros, Paul. *Big plans: North American stories and a South American journal.*
Fiction. 191 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Fawcett, Brian. *Cambodia: a book for people who find television too slow.*
Fiction. 208 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Hughes, Kenneth James. *Signs of literature: language, ideology and the literary text.*
Non-fiction. 229 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Jiles, Paulette. *The late great human road show.*
Fiction. 193 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Mercer, Michael. *Goodnight disgrace.*
Drama. 115 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Pinder, Leslie Hall. *Under the house.*
Fiction. 183 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Posse, Luis. *Free the shadows.*
Edited with an Afterword by Robert Dunham; Introduction by Robin Blaser.
Poetry. 189 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Tremblay, Michel. *Albertine, in five times.*
Translated by Bill Glassco and John Van Burek.
Drama. 76 p., 14 x 21 cm.

Cover, Ken Belford's *Fireweed* (1967).

Title page, Jim Brown's *If There are Any Noahs* (1967).

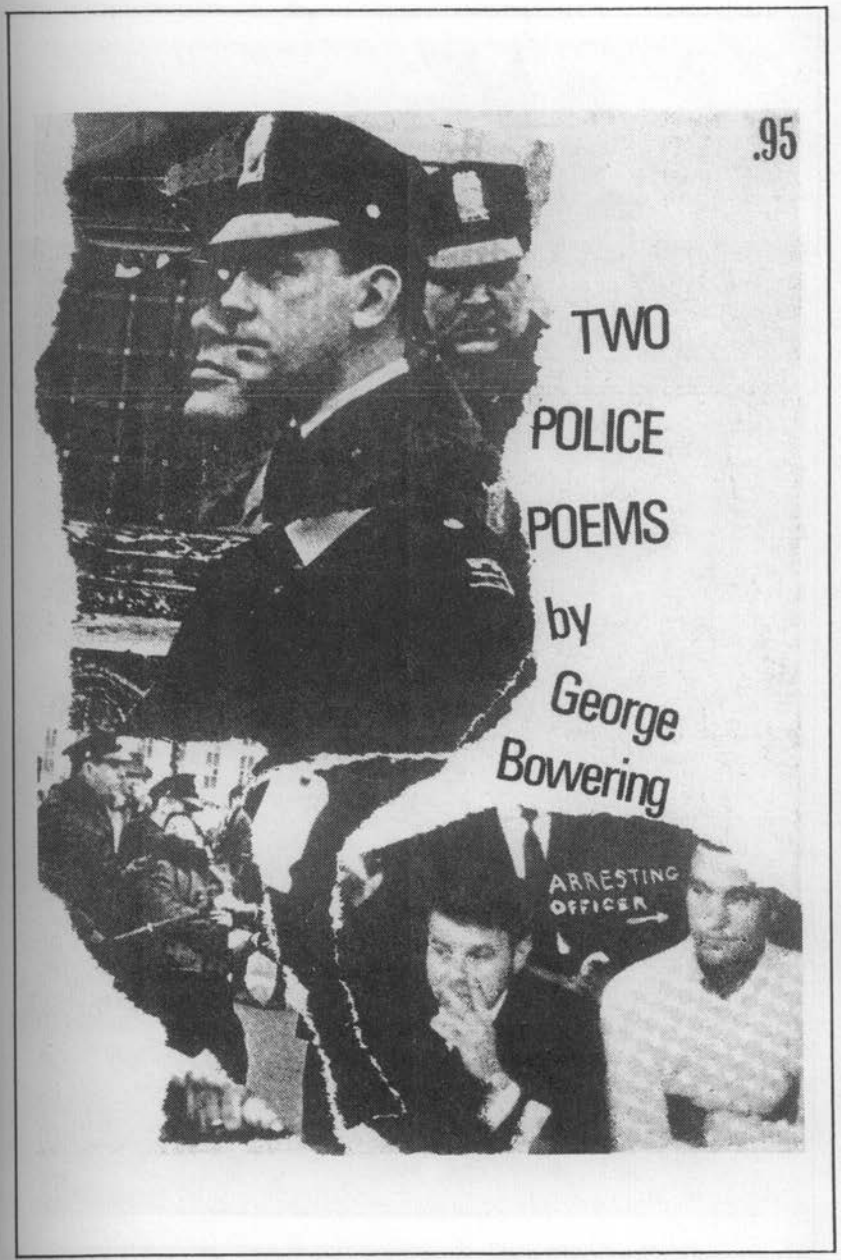
PIERRE COUPEY

CIRCLE WITHOUT CENTER

POEMS & COLLAGE

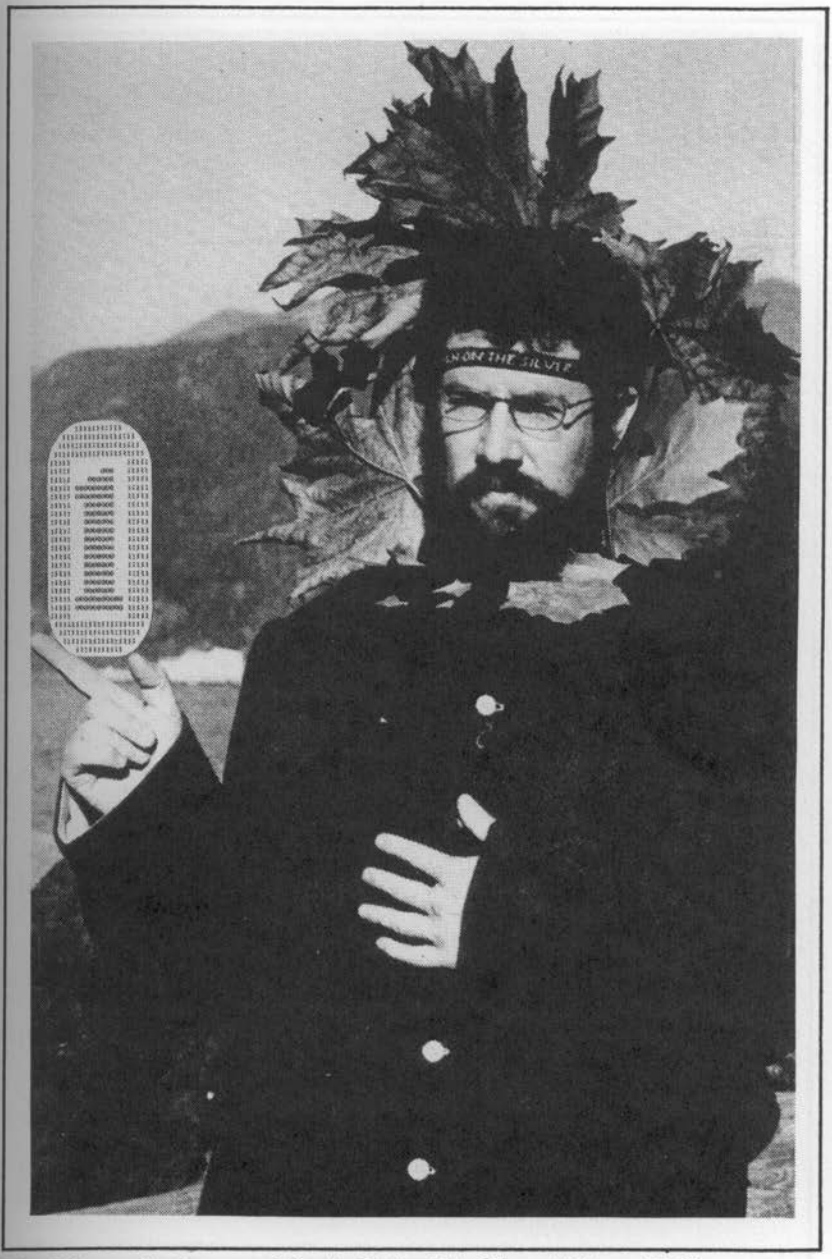
Title page, Pierre Coupey's *Circle without Center* (1967).

Title page, bill bissett's *awake in th red desert* (1968).

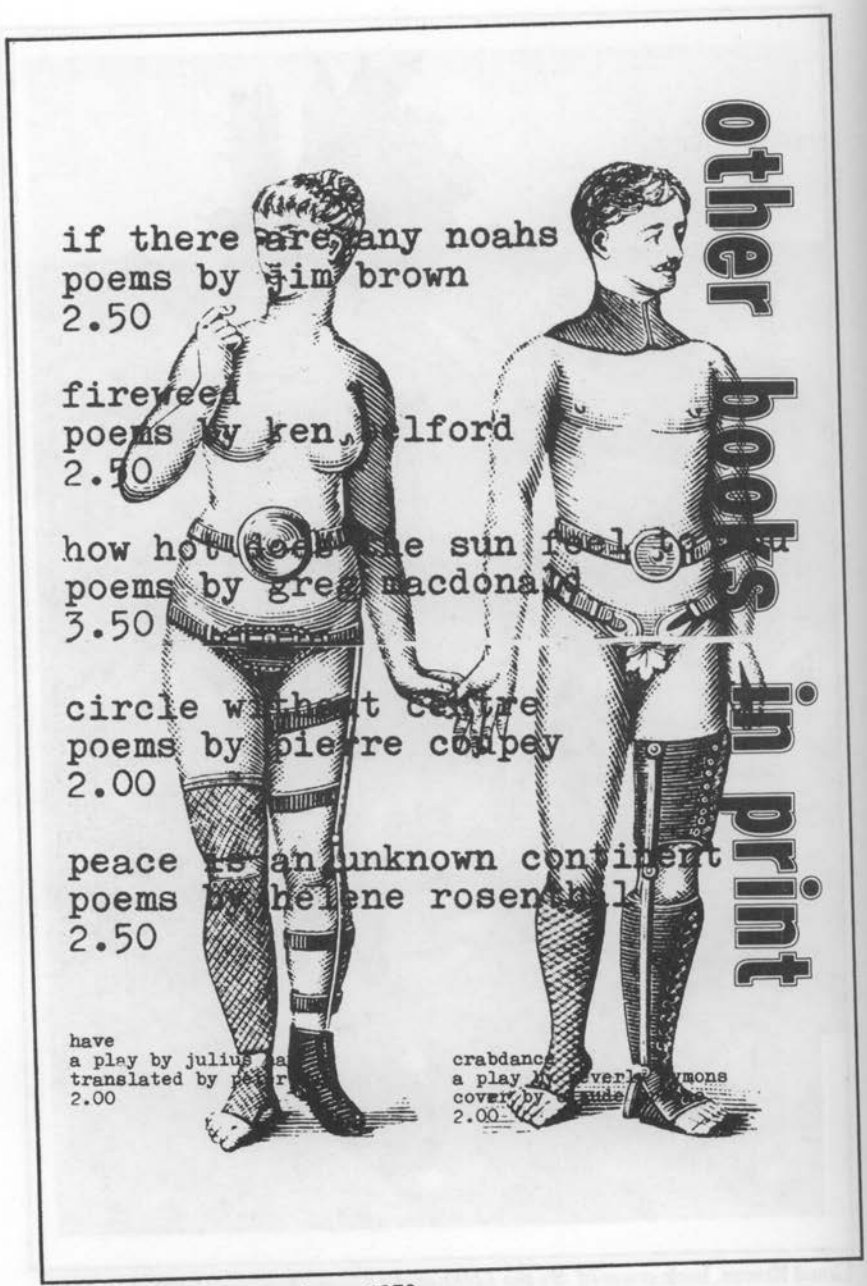


Cover, George Bowering's *Two Police Poems* (1969).

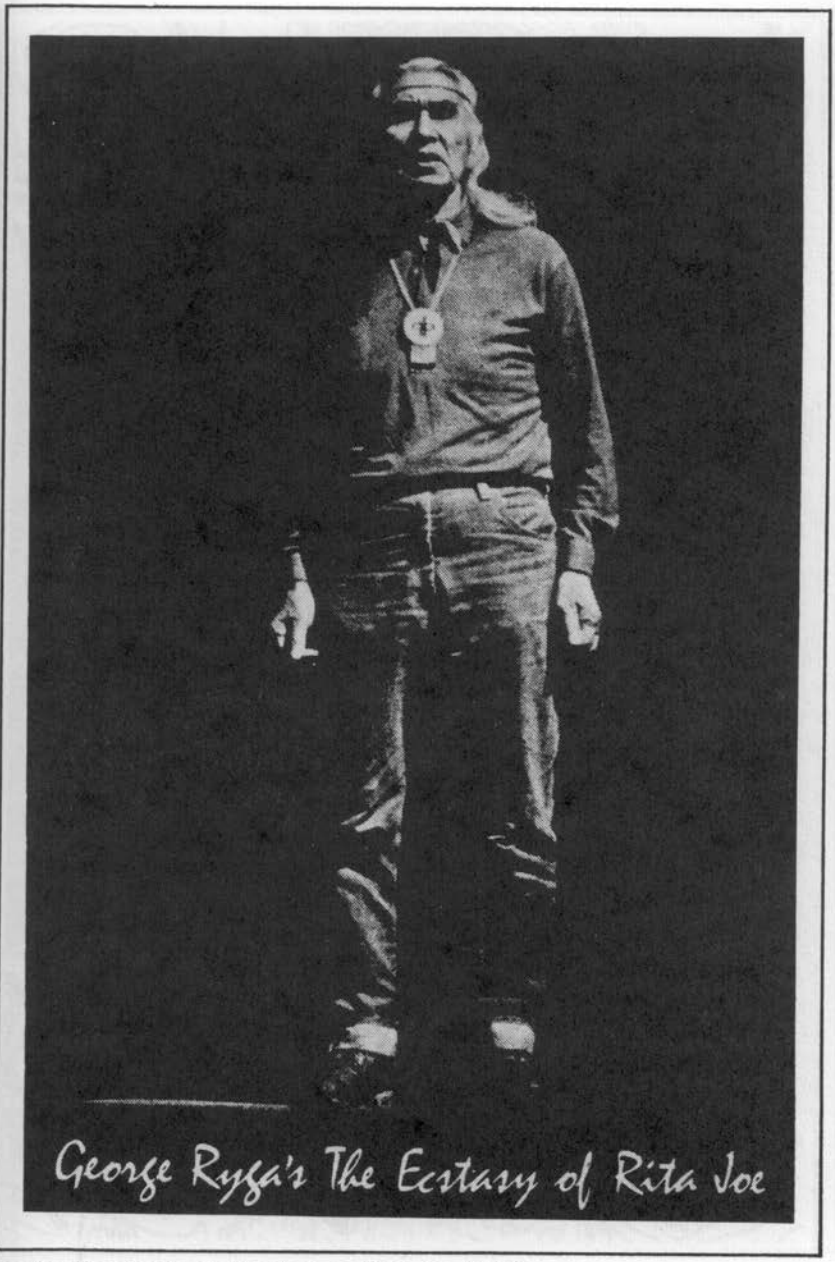
Album cover, Jim Brown's *O See Can U Say* (1969). From bottom, row 2: fr. left, Jim Brown, Gordon Fidler, David Robinson. Top, 3rd fr. right, bpNichol.



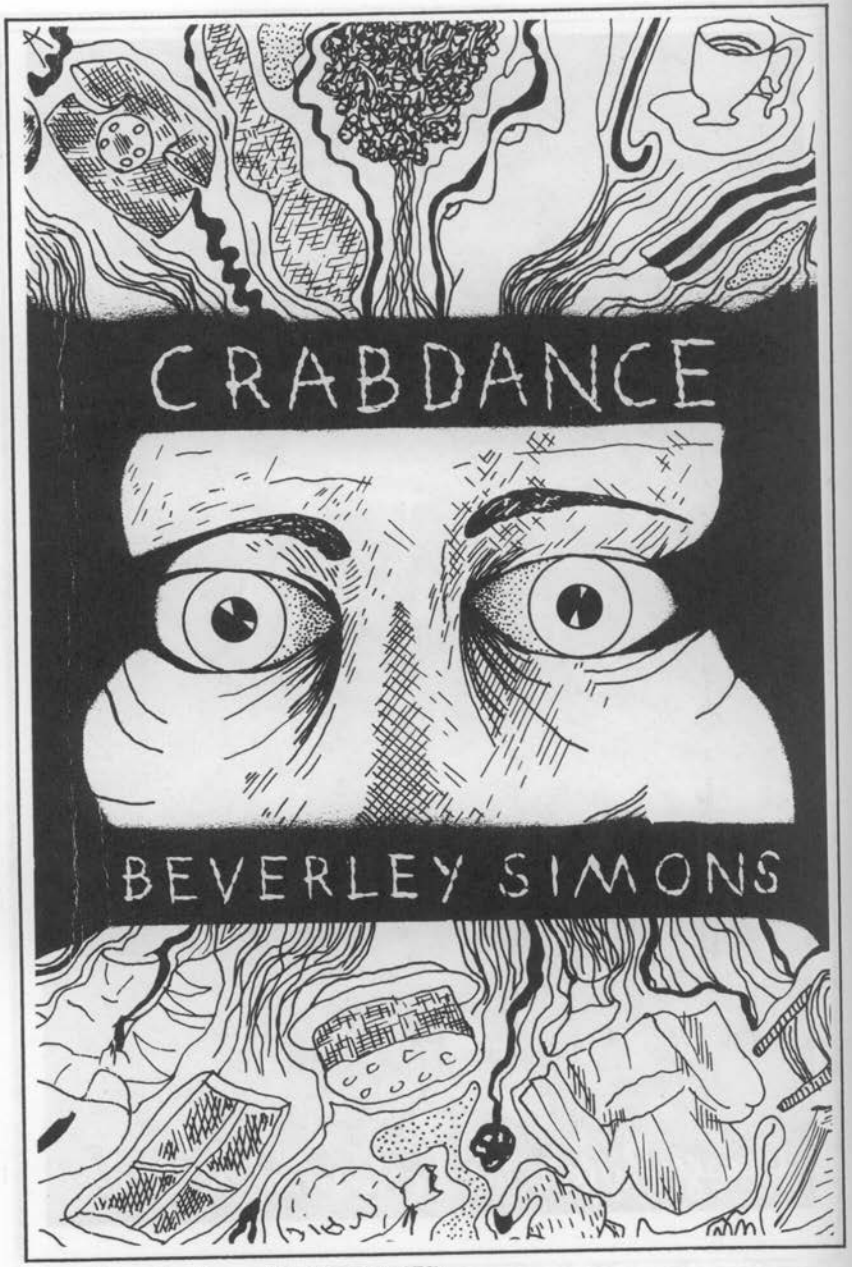
Lionel Kearns, back cover of *By the Light of the Silvery McLune* (1969).



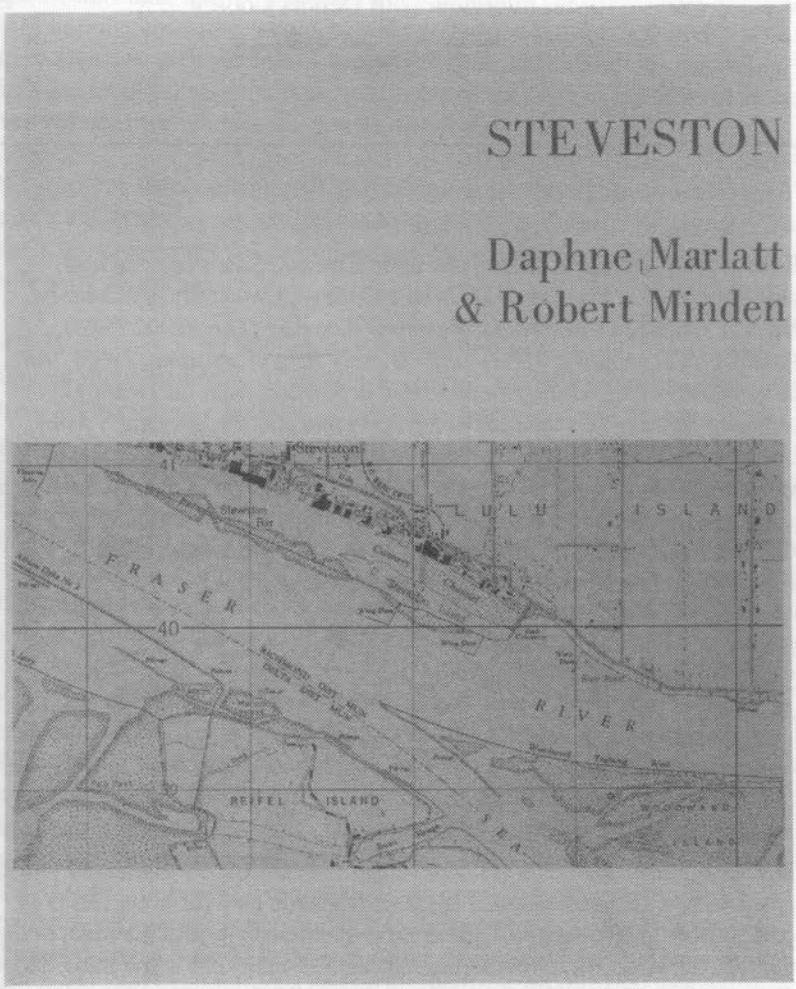
From the Talonbooks catalogue, 1970.



Cover, George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1970).



Cover, Beverley Simons' *Crabdance* (1972).



Cover, *Steveston* (1974) by Daphne Marlatt and Robert Minden.

DANIEL S. LENOSKI

Voicing Prairie Space: Interview with Dennis Cooley

Born in 1944, Dennis Cooley grew up in Estevan, Saskatchewan and currently teaches English at St. John's College, University of Manitoba. He has published three books of poetry: Leaving *(Turnstone, 1980),* Fielding *(Thistledown, 1983) and* Bloody Jack *(Turnstone, 1985). All three books reveal his interest in formal departures from the tyranny of orthodox running rhythm and the left hand margin. Progressively from* Leaving *to* Bloody Jack *authority is released from its traditional formal and ideological bastions—including the author—and placed in the mind and heart of the reader. All three books, especially* Bloody Jack, *are pleas for flexibility, knowledge and tolerance. All three search to voice that large sparsely populated and neglected Canadian prairie space.*

DL
St. Paul's College
January 17, 1986

DANIEL LENOSKI: Karyl Roosevelt in a review of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* comments that Michael Ondaatje uses different forms of perspective, and in doing so, gains an in-depth insight into the inner being of Billy the Kid.[1] Doug Fetherling has said virtually the same thing about Ondaatje's portrayal of the American west.[2] Obviously your book bears a remarkable resemblance to Ondaatje's Billy and Buddy books.[3] I was wondering whether you think that such comments are fair comments about the effect of Ondaatje's work or of *Bloody Jack?*

DENNIS COOLEY: Well, I'm not sure that my character is a character in the traditional way. I didn't particularly think of building a character, though there is one there that one could extract from the book. The point is it's probably more true of what Ondaatje has done with Billy the Kid. You

have a greater focus upon that figure. There are almost no entries in *Billy the Kid* that don't, in one way or another, deal with Ondaatje's Billy, whereas in *Bloody Jack*, there are all kinds of sections that never mention Jack Krafchenko, and require some effort on the part of the reader to integrate them into the book as a whole, to consider: What's this doing here? how is it connected with the rest of the book? Still, the similarities with *Billy the Kid* I would think would be pretty strong. It's one of my favorite books ever written by anybody; it's just an astonishing book.

DL: Are you then, perhaps trying to re-define character, because certainly there's a difference between Jack and either Billy or Buddy. Krafchenko is a much more loosely developed character. In fact, there's an incredible ambiguity about him.

DC: Well, yes. A lot of contemporary theory, as you well know, is very dubious about the notion of character—in fact, would suggest that character as we normally think about it is roughly a phenomenon of 18th and 19th century novels, that it's an invention of a certain point in history. There's a reason to suppose that not only need we not have character that way, but people aren't that way either. There isn't a simple coherence to either character or people in our time.

DL: So your concern here isn't merely stylistic and structural with regard to the re-definition of character, but epistemological as well?

DC: Oh, yeah! If I could turn it around this way: My sense was that I wasn't writing a book about Krafchenko. It was more a collision of a whole series of discourses and there *were* and *are* various ways of thinking about them. We have discourses of authority *and* discourses that we might put in opposition to them and that particularly centre on that Krafchenko figure. He's as much symbol as character. He embodies, in many ways, a kind of verbal defiance, a snubbing of the nose, at the discouse which is approved, official or proper, and that includes not simply the language of those who are well-to-do economically or have positions of influence, but even those who would invoke certain academic or literary uses of language as the "proper" ways to use it. So, I'm thinking of that in a Menippean way that the Kristeva epigraph might alert one to.[4]

DL: Well, are you, then, on the side of the so-called "improper" use of language?

DC: Yeah. That's my sense. Now whether that's the case with the readers is another matter. As we were discussing a few moments ago, I think

Bloody Jack is an immensely permissive text and a text that you could read in any number of ways. I think you can locate and re-locate pretty flexibly in the text.

DL: The position you've just elaborated is basically a position that undercuts what is proper, orthodox, traditional, and there certainly is all kinds of evidence of undercutting in the book—you undercut just about everything that exists, including yourself. In that way, the book—and this is not an oblique reference to your waistline—is very flabby. It's not hard to understand what you're against. But what are you *for*?

DC: There are no apolitical positions; there are no neutral positions; there are no positions outside matters of definition and evaluation and there are important centres in the book where I think you can locate authorial presence or measure. One of these is living life with some joy and intensity, wit, playfulness, affection, a sense of open possibilities, of distrust of settled or hardened authority. That openness and play is a very erotic sort of thing. I really think of this as an erotic book. I suppose other people think of it that way and don't like it.

DL: What do you say to people who consider this to be not merely an erotic book, but a crude and obscene book? People like Agnes Klassen who is a character in the book, but who really exists too. There are lots of Agnes Klassens. Many of us here in the English Department have even received a letter from one of them.

DC: Well, they enter the discourse. They're responsible for their reading. I'm responsible for my writing. That response is not a view of the world that much attracts me. I find that kind of tight-lipped disapproval repellent. That's not the way I'd like to go through the world or, I would hope, that anyone would go through the world. But apparently there are a lot of people prepared to do that.

DL: You seem to identify this reaction to your writing as crude and obscene with Christianity, let's say with a religious point of view. The major objector in the book is the Mennonite Agnes Klassen. The girls from St. Mary's Academy discriminate against Jack, are cruel to him. God, when he appears, is the most disgusting character in the book. Do you have an anti-religious bias?

DC: I don't think so. The systems of authority in *Bloody Jack* also tend to be largely of British derivation and eminently middle class. Almost all the authority figures tend to be people who would invoke the privilege of the

law, the press, or the Church, or whatever, in which they are beneficiaries. My sympathies in the book are with those who are in the margins as a lot of people on the prairies are. This [the Prairie Provinces] is a world where many of us identify with those on the outside or edge because historically that's where we have been put. I'm disturbed by a series of institutions that are inflexible, or have gone dead, which is not necessarily a comment on law or the legal system, or even religious belief, though as you know, I think of myself as neither Christian nor religious.

DL: You do, then, see yourself as the voice of the underprivileged, the down-trodden, the discriminated against, in this book and in *Fielding* and in *Leaving*?

DC: Yes, but one thing that I really want to guard against is a view of my work as didactic or schematic. I like to think of the resistance and the celebration of resistance as a creative thing, and it involves a joy in language. Language, in fact, is the real radical measure here. You use a different language here, a language of carnivals—

DL: —also, though, for the most part in this book, the language of the common man. There are other languages, but the book is full of the vernacular, full of misspellings, language that has a great deal of energy, but not much order, and it seems to me that that identifies you as the spokesman for an oral culture rather than necessarily a literary or print culture.

DC: Well, yes. There's a terrible irony in this though. You've put your finger on part of what I had in mind while I was doing *Bloody Jack*, of drawing on oral models and celebrating them, of trying to tap into these voices that have not been permitted into literature, or if they were permitted, were permitted often in demeaning ways, as the cause of laughter or foolishness, rather than with a certain dignity or celebration of life that they may represent. But, I perceive a print culture closing in on an oral world. Krafchenko is an oral hero coming out of an oral world. The institutions that ensnare him and finally bring him to his death are all part of print culture. I tried to work that very much into the book and I'm glad you noticed that and brought it up. The irony is, what does Cooley do...he writes a book, doesn't he?

DL: —in which Jack Krafchenko objects that the real Jack exists between the lines, not in print.

DC: So, you have it both ways, or you try to have it both ways. If you're going to be literary in our world, that overwhelmingly, almost exclusively, means that you've got to work on the page. About all you can do is move oral discourse into a written culture. It is going to be altered in doing that, so I realize I'm caught in a kind of crazy tension here that might create energy in the book, but I don't know where that takes you as reader, how you would understand that.

DL: In several poems that tension enriches and energizes the poem. I'm thinking in particular, for example, of "train song," where you use two Ukrainian slang words for genitals, and a local joke that is part of the oral culture of the region.[5] And yet at the same time, "train song," is a shape poem that functions partly because of the train tracks proceeding across pages 156 and 157. The visual/auditory tension there produces something that is funny and entertaining, rooted in a particular prairie space, yet at the same time rather meaningful. What, in fact, you've done is given us the sound and the shape of Manitoba and maybe the shape of Canada right in the middle of the page. Those two railway tracks may represent two different cultures, oral and written, French and English, male and female. You seem to be trying for the same kind of richness in those poems that quite definitely use the literary tradition, and at the same time the vernacular sound. I'm thinking of a poem like "glad gonads grinning," which is very oral and at the same time, very literary. It contains allusions to Chaucer, Yeats, Hopkins, maybe Lewis Carroll as well, that a non-academic wouldn't likely recognize, and yet the poem functions in the richest sense because of those literary allusions.

DC: Yeah well, I really appreciate your noticing that. I like to think that the writing is incredibly accessible to almost anybody and there are other things to be found, if one cares to find them or is able to find them, or is in a position to follow up on them.

DL: You must disagree violently with Kathie Kolybaba's comment that "there is no way into this book."[6]

DC: I'm bewildered by her comment. I would think that if most readers have trouble with this book, it would be because of quite the opposite reason. The book is so permissive that I would expect most readers to say "Where do I go with this?" rather than have a sense of authorial coercion, and say "Cooley is going to force me in this direction, to do these things." It's a book in which you think: What connections can I make? what can I do with this? In fact, it may even be that her comment has come out of that

exasperation, and has turned on its head in a search to explain the sense of frustration that the reader has.

DL: You obviously are playing a lot. Is it Roger Callois who says that play suspends ordinary legislation and produces new legislation.[7] What in fact you do is destroy ordinary legislation, and then you allow the reader to produce his own legislation in order to play in the text.

DC: It's hard to know with these things to what degree *does* the text determine its readings. I think there's got to be some boundaries of determination. We were talking a moment ago about what's there in *Bloody Jack* and what kind of ethical centre there is. If there is one, then there are obviously some determinations in which certain discourses or positions are privileged more than others.

DL: It think that's particularly true after the "cunning linguist" episode. It becomes almost impossible after that point in the book to read any work without looking for a sexual connotation.

DC: What do you think of the status of the man and the woman, or the men and the women, or the male/female give and take in that passage?

DL: Well, I was going to ask you the same question with regard to the book as a whole, because Kathie Kolybaba has said it's only possible to find naked ladies or ladies seen as pussy in the book.

DC: Again, that also astonishes me. I was bewildered when I read it. My sense of the book is so different that I immediately got out the book and extracted about a dozen of what (in my insensitive male vision of the world) I take to be quite poignant and gentle love poems. Take even the passages where one might suspect a reader of that kind of wariness. Take "cunning linguist." As I was writing it, I was aware of this possibility and in fact was wanting that not to happen, and I constructed it in such a way that the female figure had the upper hand in the give and take, so that she came off often better than the male figure.

DL: I think that's true. There's also a lot of love present in such playful episodes, and in other places as well: "by the red," or the poem titled "diane." There's an incredible amount of sensitivity in the book, as well as crudeness, suffering, violence....

DC: Actually, there's almost no violence! Name me some violence!!!

DL: The implicit presence of the execution of Jack.

DC: But it's an anti-hanging book!

DL: I agree with you—the violence is a means and not an end, but I find a lot of suffering in the book.

DC: But watch even that early one, "in the yard" it's called. You don't have the actual hanging, but the painfully delayed movements toward the hanging. I mean, the hanging just seems to be *absolutely* brutal and monstrous, and I wanted that sense of physical revulsion and of what a horrible thing that is being done to this body—

DL: —not to mention the mind. But when I said violence, I was thinking of the type of mental violence that results from either "shunning" or excommunciation. In that particular episode, the reader gets inside Jack's mind and feels a great deal of the agony that precedes execution.

DC: While he's waiting, he's frequently lonely and frightened. I'm just amazed by this feeling that this figure is bleak, or mean, or insensitive. My overhwhelming sense of that character is that he's whimsical, he's playful, he's affectionate, he's uncertain, he bungles, makes fun of himself, he's full of longing and desire. I just think he's so far from the vision of the ruthless killer, that I can't believe anyone who has read the book could conclude that.

DL: What about the poem about God: "god with his yellow teeth"? Isn't that a violent poem?

DC: I don't think it's so much violent as revolting, especially for those who believe in God, but even they might be able to handle it by saying: "Look, this is not the God I believe in. This is a God that certain people may believe in or that Krafchenko in his horrible sense that the world is not very hospitable may conceive of." You've got a whole number of possibilities.

* * *

DL: Let's just shift a little to a couple of things you said about metaphor and metonymy with respect to *Bloody Jack*. You've spoken elsewhere of the emphasis poetry has traditionally placed on the metaphoric, as opposed to the metonymic, and I take it you're using Jakobsen's and David Lodge's attitudes towards these terms.[8] Your poetry seems to be proceeding in the

opposite direction, toward metonymy. Are you trying, then, to blur the distinction between genres, or in fact, create a new one?

DC: I don't know, maybe, I'd never thought of the second alternative. I was certainly aware of the blurring of the edges as many contemporary readers and writers are. That's hardly a peculiar strategy or accident. The boundaries of poetry and prose are pretty dubious, especially in *Bloody Jack.*

DL: And you *do* call it a *book.*

DC: Yeah, that's right. It's not called a book of poetry; it's just called a book. I think, personally, it's one long poem, but I can well see how a person would not think of it that way and make a very good argument for not seeing it as a long poem, or even a poem at all. One could quite easily read it as a mix of genres. I've tried to work on those edges, partly in the ways you suggested, by writing some poems not in a metaphoric way, moving them off the axis of substitution and on to the axis of sequence. That's happening in a fair bit of contemporary writing.

DL: Yeah. But you seem to have pushed it farther. You've opened up the form of the book; you've opened up the form of poetry, and I guess of prose, and you've opened up the line a lot. I wonder whether this is a conscious attempt to re-define the line as well.

DC: People have done various things. I've been influenced in my poetics a fair bit, as you know, by some American poets, Robert Duncan more than anyone else. He has influenced the way I think about poetry, including coming to think of the line as a possible form of composition. Nevertheless, I use the line very differently from him. I try to do more things with it. You can use it in many many different ways, setting aside that very traditional prosody that obtained for several centuries. You can do all sorts of other crazy things with the line if you no longer define it as a metrical unit.

DL: Or a grammatical unit???

DC: Well, that's almost the next stage of literary history. When you move away from the metrical line, you say: What can you do now? Those people who wrote free verse early in the 20th century composed their lines off grammatical units. They talked about the cadence of a line, and as near as I can tell, they viewed it as a grammatical unit.

DL: You've mentioned Robert Duncan as an influence, but when the book came out, the first person that occurred to me as an influence was James Joyce, and in particular, *Ulysses*, and even more specifically than that, "The Oxen of the Sun" episode. I was wondering about Joyce as a direct influence on this book.

DC: You mentioned this to me before and I was somewhat taken aback, and I've been thinking about it since...I don't think he was a direct influence. I suppose a possible exception could be the one breathless character in the park.

DL: The Molly Bloom of "in the park"?

DC: Yes, in that passage there, as I wrote into it the breathless excitement of that young woman, I may have vaguely had in my mind a parody of Molly Bloom, a vague sense of Joyce. It's hard to know what you have in your mind during composition and what you make up in retrospect. In any event, I've been thinking about your comment and it has occurred to me that Joyce is one of the few early moderns who maybe was leery of a master-narrative or superstructure. It may have had something to do with him as an Irishman living in a colonized world, or on the margins in Trieste or Zürich. When you live in a colonial environment, in many ways you are living on the margin. As such, it is a lot easier to perceive of the world as bedevilled by master structures and locate your life in a more free-wheeling and mobile way.

DL: Well, I think that's rather what Wolfgang Iser says in *The Implied Reader* about Joyce's use of diverse styles in the "The Oxen of the Sun" episode and throughout *Ulysses*. He says that Joyce writes in various different styles because he realizes they imply various different perspectives and values. Accordingly, he doesn't want to impose any *one* upon life. He does not want to limit the object of his focus, but present it as "potentially illimitable," no matter how commonplace it may be.[9]

DC: Now that you mention it, it sounds rather familiar.

DL: This brings up a couple of other questions with respect to Joyce. First of all, *Ulysses* is a great comic novel which questions the traditional hierarchal subordination of the comic to the tragic. Are you doing the same thing, because you not only have a tremendous sense of play, but also a good deal of energy and humour?

DC: Sure, comedy politically, especially the kind of Menippean comedy, almost slapstick, I'm working with at times is meant to be liberating and subversive, to challenge hierarchies. Tragedy works in a hierarchical world. You have to have superior people. How can you fall if there is no hierarchy in which you privilege those who begin at the top of the hierarchy and lament their movement down?

DL: You can fall from an imagined height as Willy does in *Death of a Salesman.*

DC: I don't think *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy. Miller wants it to be one because of the honorific term. I don't think that it's possible any longer to write tragedy. Still, I think that *Death of a Salesman* is a great play. Our evaluation of it should not depend on the traditional privileging of tragedy. One ought to say that tragedy is just another form, not a better form. It's had its day. Now we write in other forms more appropriate to our time and place.

DL: Let's talk more about generic terminology. Like Pound and Eliot and Yeats, Joyce is usually called a Modernist and we've spoken of the similarities between *Bloody Jack* and *Ulysses*, as well as the Postmodernist *Collected Works of Billy the Kid ;* you speak of *your* book as Postmodernist. What's the difference between Modernism and Postmodernism?

DC: If you invoke Joyce on this occasion, the question is problematic because Joyce may very well be in many ways exempted from the definitions of Modernism; he may be a real anomaly here. Postmodernism is not simply confined to a sharp division historically, as no other literary term has been either. So Postmodernists look commonly for other earlier writing for which they have an affinity, *Tristram Shandy* being the obvious one in the English tradition. So you certainly can find earlier instances. Writers and critics struggle over these things, but one of the major differences between Modernists and the Postmodernists is that matter of authority and structure; there's a much greater desire among Modernists to seek and admire overriding systems of knowing and valuing whereas, among Postmodernists, there is either a sense that they are not available, or that they're not wanted.

* * *

DL: All of your books celebrate the local a good deal. You almost seem obsessed with naming local things. That obviously leaves you open to the

criticism of being parochial. Don't you have a responsibility to your American and British audiences, to those people who would rather walk across the street to see *Barnum* than see *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, a better reviewed play about a Canadian hero.[10]

DC: All writing is local, it's just that what happens as a result of certain accidents of expansion is that certain local cultures get moved out into the larger world from time to time. Is life in Manhattan any less local than life in Winnipeg? I think not. The reason it seems not to be any less local is that, for the time being, it inhabits a world that is exporting itself in movies and television and books and so on. Those exports accompany the military and economic presence of that nation in various ways. American literature hardly got into American universities until well into the 20th century. Why was it that *Moby Dick* was found worthy in the 1930s or whenever it first was, and not before? It has a lot to do with the fact that British imperialism was still overwhelming American culture and their measures of themselves. So, the recognition of texts, in places other than where they were written, has really very little to do with how locally located they are; it has a lot to do with how seriously a culture is treated elsewhere and that in turn has very little to do with its own merit. It has a lot to do with certain other forms of power. These things are never neutral. Things get known not simply because of their innate virtues, though that helps, but they get known in large part because they are part of a large institution that is moving out into the world.

DL: What you're saying is that your responsibility for the local is more important than your responsibility to possible international and especially American or British audiences?

DC: Yes. If you look over your shoulder you're probably going to lose the verve, freshness, the intensity that's available to you. I think there's no such thing as universality. There's no such thing. If you fool yourself into thinking there is, there's a good chance you're going to end up writing things that are so empty, so devoid of all smell and texture, that they're no worth to anyone. I certainly won't buy the notion that a death in London is more universal than a death in Estevan, or that a reference to a bar in San Francisco is somehow cosmopolitan and a reference to a beer parlour in Winnipeg is not. They may be better known, but they are no more universal.

DL: You've put into your books a good many local characters without bothering to change their names, in much the same way that James Joyce does, except that you've a lot more reverence for your friends than he seems

to have.[9] What's happened is, of course, that the book has become a game to try and determine the significance of the reference to, let's say, Ken Hughes, Robert Kroetsch, David Arnason, Danny Lenoski, or Paul "Hjartarson" [sic] within the text. You associate a good many of these people with the crow, another friend. What does the crow mean to you? Why all this affection for a farmer's nemesis?

DC: The crow is vaguely anti-establishment; he's noisy and rambunctious and he doesn't speak in reverent voices. But there's a local reference too. You know that Harry Crowe case at United College.[12] In these parts, the crow is a symbol of the rebel, of the margins. Hence Krafchenko's affinity for him in the book; there's a kind of sympathy for his rambunctiousness, his ingenuity, his cunning. The crow, as you know, is a mimic; he can actually speak in a human voice. So what better muse symbol could I find for Cooley, or Krafchenko, or Kroetsch?

DL: So when you criticize Kroetsch for making crows talk in *What the Crow Said* (1978), the criticism is ironic.

DC: He didn't make them talk enough. This is what the crow *really* said.

DL: What about Paul Hjartarson being an owner of a cafe? Is that a comment about his weight?

DC: No, I hadn't that in mind, though it may be valid. Part of it is just a coding. I just wanted to have my friends there as company, to have them in there as a kind of little joke, and an act of affection. Sometimes they're more locally coded. Alexandre Amprimoz becomes the authority in French. As you and I both know, he is extremely sophisticated in his knowledge of Italian, French, English, and even Mathematics. In the book I let him be the authority on very small French words. He might be in a position to give advice to the local Tory.

DL: And Lenoski as the listener is appropriate?

DC: Yes, that was typed right into the manuscript. More seriously, I would like to have included more female friends, but with Krafchenko as a flamboyant ladies' man and Cooley's confusion with Krafchenko, that might have caused some problems. There's also a more general aesthetic strategy to such local naming. That's another sign of Postmodernism if you will, where you deliberately violate the historical situation. Ostensibly, it is pre-World War I Winnipeg that I play with. When I insert the names of people who are contemporaries, what I'm doing is declaring

this as a *made* thing. This is not history, though history is a made thing too. Cooley made this all up. There's a declaration of solidarity, a community of not only friends, but of literary people, intellectual, cultural people, who walk with you in that world, so that in a lot of ways, it's a kind of gifting. Writing is a gifting. Part of it is that. You're gifted with those friends and in turn there's a kind of giving as you enter them in the text.

DL: Yes, that's what I've told my classes. I feel honoured, thrilled, and delighted to be there. But what you've just said also leads me to believe that you don't think of history as a valid discipline?

DC: Sure it is. But historians often fool themselves about what they're doing. One of the major mistakes that most people make in our time is to assume that their language gives them virtually direct access to a phenomenal world, to an experiential world, and if we learn anything from the kind of *mad* theory of criticism that's come out of especially contemporary France, it's that there's no such thing and there never can be any such thing. Language is always mediation, always culturally constitituted. That's one of the major recognitions in Postmodernism generally, when it acknowledges its artificiality. It is saying "I am not giving you the world directly or nakedly. I'm giving you an invented world."

DL: But is it only that? Is the message only the medium?

DC: Oh no. My sense of this is traditional in some ways. Language refers, yes, but it is also reflexive and then you have all these things going on. I'm not a nihilist about this, nor an aesthete in the sense that I believe all we can do is construct these inner patterns or fictions. They connect to the rest of life in various ways, but the connections are very complex and slippery and we have to keep reminding ourselves that these are mediations. But I certainly believe that there are references and that one of the major pleasures we take in reading is one of recognition, or of apparent recognition, of a world that we think we inhabit when we are not reading a book. Part of the reading experience for readers, whether they knew me or not, would be to recognize that yes, this book is analogy and that formally it's governed by those aesthetic principles even as it subverts them at times. But this also is a poem about something that actually happened, a death in the world, and that I think most of us will read wanting all of those things. I read wanting everything as I write wanting everything.

DL: How important was history to *Bloody Jack*? You obviously have used a good many "factual" details. Others you've changed. What responsibility do you have towards the so-called "factual" details?

DC: None whatsoever, as a historian would describe them. This is a poem, so if I change the names or make up the names or I alter dates, or insert characters who didn't exist or whatever—there's no problem. The discourse here is of poetry, not of history, so the paramount measure of these texts is not "Did this really happen?" or "Are these facts correct?"—though that might interest us and inform our reading. But that's not the primary virtue. What's important is not "Did this really happen?", but "Is this interesting?" "By the principles of literature, is this interesting?"

DL: Is it a good story?

DC: Well, I would hope that's not the main measure of my books, especially *Bloody Jack*. The latter is largely poetry and it goes out of its way to explode the chronology.

DL: It is poetry that emphasizes the metonymic, which moves it in the direction of storytelling and the story begins to take over at times, to tell you, especially in "diane." "diane" is one poem I admire a great deal, among many others that I admire. In "diane," the goddess Diana, perhaps functioning as muse, is mixed up with Diane, your wife, and Krafchenko's sister, who tried to breathe life into him after he was executed. What's happening of course, is that you are becoming impregnated with the muse, if you like, or vice versa, and also Cooley and Krafchenko are becoming mixed up. Did you have a sense of possession, let's say, of blurring your personality with that of Krafchenko when you were writing this book?

DC: Well, I would put it this way....Evidently, Krafchenko did exist at a certain place and time. I tried to fantasize into him and obviously there's a strong confusion of narrator, author and protagonist. Yes, I believe strongly in a muse. One of the other things I had in mind there, since you speak of possession, was that Diana is also a witch figure, isn't she, and there's some notion of being bewitched or possessed. That woman is trying to revive the dead body and the language suggests a rather disturbing sexual embrace by the sister of the body of her dead brother.

DL: There are also many allusions to classical mythology, classical stories, if you like, in *Bloody Jack*. Not only do we have Molly Bloom getting into the text, but we also have the Odysseus story with Penny making her

presence known. We have Hermes in the text. We have Mrs. Rhea Morse, perhaps the reversal of the Oedipal situation at the end of her monologue.

DC: Yes, I was working with that pretty carefully. OK, we have the Penelope, but there's also one poem when Krafchenko and his buddies are going to rob the bank and it's cold and by the time they get there, they're drunk and they're cold and they're whimpering, and he is saying "I wish I were home with Penny in bed." Part of what I'm doing is parodying the macho adventure story. He's a kind of Odysseus figure, but often in a comical way. There's not the grand heroic, other than in his verbal audacity and his cunning. But I mean, there are no feats of extraordinary physical prowess.

DL: So, you've subjected the classical story to the prairie mentality, made it appropriate to western Canada.

DC: Yes. Yes!

DL: You've talked about your lack of responsibility to an American audience. You've also spoken about Canadianizing European myths. Do you see your goal as Robert Kroetsch sees his, in terms of what he has called variously "fucking the past," "unnaming," "uninventing," "re-naming"? Is this the special responsibility of the Canadian and prairie writer?

DC: Yes, especially the prairie writer. We're fighting like hell to get out from under measurers of our world who have told us we don't matter, our voicings are boring. It's a real struggle. That's our culture. All acts are political and these are profoundly political attempts to voice release, speak out of our world when we've been told by everybody elsewhere that this doesn't matter, that you must imitate us as much as possible. So, sure...

DL: We're back to the epigraph again, eh?

DC: Yeah, yeah, for sure. This is a very political act. I'm saying, "Here are our voices, look out! Let em go!" The poem more than any that have released our prairie voices is Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*.[13] It's the breakthrough poem for prairie poetry.

DL: Kroetsch has meant a great deal to the writing community here and even across the country, but so have you and David Arnason. Perhaps we should talk a little about your editing. There's been a tremendous outburst of writing in Manitoba since you and David, along with a number of others,

founded Turnstone Press. How much do you think the Manitoba Writers' Guild—which has well over 286 members now and didn't exist prior to 1982—owes its existence and fertility to Turnstone?[14]

DC: There are lots of things behind that surge. Those things never happened because of one or two people. There has to be a passion, a readiness among a lot of people before that range of activity can occur. There are loads of people in fact who were there, who were simmering, writing, ready to go. A better way of putting it is that there was a readiness and a need all over the prairies. In the mid-70s and even slightly earlier you get vehicles, small magazines and presses opening up and there's just a flood of writing. It works both ways. You've got to have the institutions, the outlets to release and to anoint writers, but the writers have to be there at least in potential, or on the verge. So it's a very large process. Any individuals have to be part of a much larger action.

DL: The creation of the Manitoba Arts Council and the Saskatchewan Arts Council and the interest of the Canada Council obviously meant a great deal too...[15] We seem to be arguing that the time was propitious for you to write *Bloody Jack*. Do you think you can duplicate this performance?

DC: I can't imagine doing anything quite like it, so ambitious or permissive, ever again, although if I have any luck, the manuscript I'm working on now will offend people all over again. I've got some soul/body poems. The souls are bitchy, cranky, and superior, and they can't wait to get back where they came from. The bodies are affectionate and playful, and like to drink beer and make love.

DL: I assure you I'll try hard to be offended. Thanks for the interview, Dennis.

NOTES

1. *New York Times Book Review*, 17 Nov. 1974, pp. 60-61.
2. "A New Way to do It,"*Saturday Night*, 86, No. 2 (1971), 30.
3. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1970). *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1976).
4. Cooley, of course, is referring here to Julia Kristeva's explanations of Menippean discourse in *Desire in Language* (1980).

5. The local joke is: What does the train say when it goes into Frazer Wood? The answer is in the poem.

6. Review of *Bloody Jack* in *Border Crossings*, 4, No. 4 (Fall, 1985), 43.

7. *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: The Free Press, 1958), p. 10.

8. See *The Modes of Modern Writing* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. ix-27.

9. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 179ff.

10. John Gray, "Preface" to *Billy Bishop Goes to War, Modern Canadian Plays*, ed. J. Wasserman (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1985), pp. 384-85.

11. Terry Goldie seems to have seriously misjudged Cooley when he sees this as proof of Cooley's egocentricity, in a review called "Cooleying it in a Deconstructed World," *The NeWest Review*, 11, No. 5 (Feb. 1986), 15.

12. In the late fifties, Harry Crowe taught in the History Department at United College (now the University of Winnipeg). In April of 1958 a letter from Crowe to a colleague appeared on the desk of the College Principle, W.C. Lockhart, who opened, read, and copied it. The letter was critical of both the ideals of the College and of Lockhart himself. Lockhart showed it to the College Board, some of whom already saw Crowe—as others did—as a leader of a radical faculty group dissatisfied with the administration's response to poor working conditions and salary. Ultimately, after much acrimony on both sides, the Board voted to terminate Crowe's employment effective August 31, 1959. A good many of the faculty and students saw the events subsequent to the arrival of the Crowe letter in Lockhart's office as a violation of academic freedom and supported Crowe against the administration. Some faculty threatened resignation and the College was picketed by students. A committee of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), chaired by Professor Clarence Barber, was set up to consider the matter and decided that Crowe "had been a victim of injustice, violative of academic freedom and tenure." Nevertheless, Crowe left United College and became, for a time, head of research for the Canadian Labor Congress. For more details to this extremely complicated series of events, see A.G. Bedford, *The University of Winnipeg: A History of the Founding Colleges* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press), pp. 296-300. For Cooley, Crowe is quite clearly an appropriate symbol of the oppressed leftist rebel.

13. Robert Kroetsch, *Seed Catalogue* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1977).

14. The Manitoba Writers' Guild was born officially in 1981, though it had been informally discussed for several years by the St. John's College and Riverside Writers groups in Winnipeg.

15. The Saskatchewan Arts Council was created in 1949, the Manitoba Arts Council in 1969.

STEVE McCAFFERY

Under the Blowpipe: George Bowering's Αλλοφανες

Allophanes begins with a citation, claimed to be dictated to the author by the deceased poet Jack Spicer: "It began with a sentence heard in the author's head: The snowball appears in Hell every morning at seven. It was said in the voice of Jack Spicer."[1] *Allophanes*, then, emerges beneath two signatories, two proprietors: the author (George Bowering), whose proper name will authenticate the book, and a dictator, Spicer, a disembodied voice, whose proper name re-formulates the deceased, primal father of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and who, as a spectral subject, haunts the text's temporal unwindings to a degree that can never be ascertained.

> Pretending to be inaugural, the sign could only endlessly mime its own circularity, since it has already constituted to de-signate—to whom—its own birth. Mythology imprisons this tautological figure into that of a Monster, a Sphere, an Egg where the nothingness unites with Being, and whose multiple names—Noun, Kneph, Okeanos, Ouroboros, Aion, Leviathan, Ain-Soph, etc.—arbitrarily conjure up that which in *principle* has no appelation, as though to deny to thought the access to its own silence.[2]

To these names we will add the snowball in hell, as a blank, yet eponymous space, placed in *Allophanes* prior to all metaphoric operation and akin to an arche-sentence, providing the *condition*, not the sense, of *Allophanes* as a writing. To read this work is to re-trace the gap between a dictation and a written series of repetitions. Almost. From its initial appearance the snowball in hell will extend a profound ambivalence. Reappearing and permuting, it will always be that to which the work is attached yet from which it is constantly escaping. At times the condition of change, at times the change itself, the sentence will never escape its temporal predicament and will raise constantly the question of the productivity of its own significatory ground. As Jean Paris puts it, "the question which begins here no longer springs from the sign because, on the contrary, it supposes it; it

no longer concerns in criticism, either the signifier or the signified, either speech or writing, but the gap itself from which these will be engendered, or, if one prefers, this articulation whose other name would be: *change*."[3] This moment, where space explicates itself, will be the moment in which hell's snowball is born into writing *as a writing* ; a dictated and a written moment that asserts its identity as its own rupture, signalizing the opening moment into that multiplicity of which *Allophanes* will be the trace.

The snowball appears in Hell
every morning at seven.

Dr Babel contends
about the word's form, striking
its prepared strings
endlessly, a pleasure
moving rings outward thru
the universe. All
sentences are to be served.

You've tried it & tried it
& it cant be done, you
cannot close your ear—

i.e. literature
must be thought, now.

Your knee
oh
class
equal
poet
will like use a simile because he hates
ambiguity.

The snowball says it:
all sentences are imperative.[4]

2

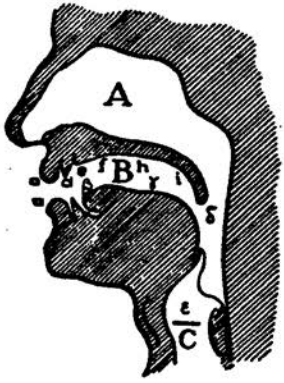
Allophanes is a small book (4 1/4" X 8") whose cover will detain us for quite some time. Its central design is a triangle cut out from the surface of the paper. In the space of this triangle is a text comprising geometric

shapes and symbols suggestive of pictographs or hieroglyphs and all decidedly non-phonetic. Through a fold in the paper, the cover's underside becomes a surface. The triangular excision in this way serves to frame a part of the cover's unexposed side. As a result of this cut and fold, the cover's recto-verso distinction collapses and a profound discontinuity is produced upon the cover's plane. An interiority is presented as external and the notion of page is immediately doubled: (opening the cover to meet the title page this other surface is not seen).[5]

The triangle is resonant with associations. It is foundationally letteral, being both the diagrammatic relation of signifier to signified through a referent apex (as outlined in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics)* and doubling too the actual form of the Greek letter *delta.* The triangle also appears at various points within the moving body of the poem. It is the horizontal effect of the tent (at the end of section VI) and reappears in the triangular torso of the pictogram of St. Arte (Astarte?) that concludes section V:

Letter, talisman, Christian trinity, pyramid, inverted pubis are all evoked in this framing shape, which is also a material lack of a surface.

At the end too, of this geometrical labyrinth will be a human throat. My larynx, placed between the trachea and the base of my tongue, forms a considerable projection in the middle line. It presents at its upper zone *the form of a triangular box*, flattened behind and at the sides and bounded in front by a prominent vertical ridge. Its interior houses my rima glottidis in the form of a narrow *triangular* fissure. Also, the portion of my laryngeal cavity above my true vocal cords is broad and *triangular* and named the vestibule. The superior aperture of my larynx is a *triangular opening* in close proximity to which are situated the cartilage known as my cuneiform. My rima glottidis is an elongate fissure between the inferior (i.e. my true) vocal cords and sub-divides into my glottis vocalis (the vocal portion) and my glottis respiratoria (the respiratory part). When vocalic activity is not taking place (for instance, in the condition know as writing) my glottis vocalis is *triangular*. During extreme adduction of the cords (for instance, in the



condition known as speaking) it is reduced to a linear slit and my glottis respiratoria assumes a *triangular* form. Of the five muscles of my vocal cords, the crico-thyroid is of a *triangular* shape. Already, in the cover's constitutional ambivalence we are figuring the withdrawal of speech into the labyrinthine *tactics* of writing. Clearly this cover lacks an innocent, utilitarian function of protection (partly concealing, partly announcing the promised interiority). To repeat: the cover folds to bring its back into visibility through a gap in the front, presenting a physical lack that shows more than it would had the surface been complete. An instability is thereby introduced into the nature of the surface which now carried tri-partite implications as a cover, a frame and a frivolous subversion.[6] The non-phonetic "text" thus framed in the triangle participates in the system of the cover without actually being a member. Bowering's (Spicer's?) initiatory sentence is framed precisely in the way these non-phonetic characters are framed "inside" the cover. As a received dictation, it enters the textual economy as a perverse "fold" in the writing and similarly participates without membership. Rendering all quotation in *Allophanes* contaminated, this sentence further prevents the writing from being a first order operation. The writing cannot even gain an innocence but must inscribe itself and its implications inter-textually, with a constant referral to another voice beneath the surface of the writing, held absent but constantly re-called inside of the writing's shifting scenes, which work ambivalently throughout the poem to include the exclusion of this sentence.

3

The image moves not forward but elsewhere.

> A thing final in itself and therefore good:
> One of the vast repetitions final in
> Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round
> And round and round, the merely going round
> Until merely going round is a final good.
> (Wallace Stevevens, *Notes*
> *toward a Supreme Fiction)*

Mathematics holds the fold to be one of the simplest of the seven elementary *catastrophes*. (A catastrophe is a discontinuity or instability in a system). The catastrophic moments in *Allophanes* occur when the poem's continuous and repeated fabric (i.e. its homogenous, phonetic plane) erupts into non-phonetic events. There is always the danger of this *other* script (occasionally folding to reveal from its back the Script of the Other, i.e. Spicer's) emerging in *Allophanes* as an alternate writing. As the cover

erupts its under-surface, so too the twenty-five sections of the poem always threaten a catastrophic folding into another script. We have already witnessed the appearance of St. Arte in section V and the non-phonetic complex in the cover's triangular lack. But there are several others too. We should take instant account of the fact that the poem's title (on cover and title page) is spelled in Greek: Αλλοφαηες

The Hebrew aleph appears in section XVI:

A gestural mark in section XIV:

These other scripts, as momentary eruptions, mark a difference within the poem's scriptive system and suggest, not the protean combinatory structure of phoneticism's writing, but a far deeper, prior writing, now banished (like Freud's primary repression) to a place behind the cover, folded, reversed, engulfed and smothered as an agency below the surface of the manifest writing. The poem's key image too, is not without its catastrophic part. SNOWBALL in its pure, phonetic form is host to a stubborn pictographic element. The word, as a signifier, appears, as we shall see, in a complex series of departures and returns to its matrix sentence. But examined on the level of its primary articulation (i.e. of eight phonemes into one word), the third letter is O and functions as an introjected pictogram visually miming in its shape the word's meaning. We can think of this letter as the snowball's anasemic state. It is phoneticism's radical other within itself, invaginated, like the cover, and disseminated as a pictographic contaminant throughout the poem. In acknowledging this anasemic element in *Allophanes* we open up the poem to a bewildering play within its own micro-structures. Wherever an O occurs (in "god" and "dog" for instance) then the catastrophic moment takes effect, un-assimilable in a conventional reading and in the order of a waste in the poem's economy of meaning.

The problematic scene of *Allophanes* can now be specified as the field of a thread working back and forth through two spectral columns: a spectral subject (Spicer as the absent-cause, the Primal Father in a new guise) and a spectral script (Greek, non-phonetic, pictographic and anasemic). Within this space, amid its catastrophic constitution, *Allophanes* stages the transformations of its matrix dictation.

The snowball in hell is both the site and series of fetishistic duplications. It is of the nature of the fetish (like the famous instance of

Van Gogh's shoes) to detach itself from its origins and to re-occur in obsessive transformations. Spicer's sentence is motivated as an object-choice onto which are projected numerous micro-discourses, phrasings, changes, ideations, propositions and questions, all compulsively repeated and re-inscribed. The snowball in hell is a contaminated and contaminating image, entering the poem as a fold in utterance and instantly problematizing (as we have seen above) the work's significatory ground. We will note a few of these repetitions in the following catalogue of movements.

Section I introduces the eponymous sentence: "The snowball appears in Hell / every morning at seven." The sentence itself seems a compact aporia (how can a snowball that depends on cold for its existence appear in Hell with its attendant heat and flames?) that generates a binary opposition: cold/heat to be submitted to numerous permutations. In section II, the sentence bifurcates and pursues two different itineries. The snowball links to *snow castles* ("snow castles / are alright for lyric poems"), whilst Hell connects with mass communication ("Now it is real as a newspaper / headline in Hell"). The snowball appears iconically for the first time in section III as a picto-ideogrammic mark: a black sphere, like dilated punctuation. Its shape figures the *ball*, yet its blackness opposes the white of the snow. (These oppositions within items are numerous in *Allophanes* and eradicate any simple, unitary meaning.) Hell shifts context into "we grow old together, / we will never meet in Hell" and the snowball re-situates in the assertion "the snowball is not the cold." Already we can trace the anasemic operation in the emergence of the letter O as a pictographic imbed. In section IV the two images contextualize within the heat-cold opposition. Hell's thermal connotations echo in the "*coeur flambé*," whilst the snowball develops its interrogatory code: "& what would a snowball / know about polar knowledge?" In VI, Hell initiates a cultural code ("I haven't got a Dante's chance in Hell"). The snowball transforms to become the white sphere of the baseball and initiates a chain of content that will be centered on that specific sport. ("That snowball's got red stitches / & it's imitating God. / Tells me from third to home / is The Way Down and Out"). In section VII, the white-sphere-snow-ball complex announces a new change in morphology: "The egg sits there, / it does not rot itself." Hell echoes again through its thermal connotations. Asking where "Maud has gone" the speaking subject elaborates: "She crouches / over the fire / her back curved / to her care." The matrix image, at this point, begins to self-contaminate and fold back into itself. As a scene of repetition the section invests in the possibility to break down the discrete partition of the binary opposition. In this case Hell's thermal territory is insinuated by at least three terms from baseball: ("crouch," "curve" and "back"). A *clean* structuralist reading of *Allophanes* is thus impossible, for one set of oppositions erupts inside the other and proliferates a carcinoma of highly local and ludic meanings. In

section VIII, Hell assumes a destinatory function as the snowball-baseball transmogrifies into "a spilled ice cream ball, / kick it to hell & Gone, / & turning the cone over, / place it on your head." The triangle here asserts itself as *cone*, whilst the transformation: snowball/ice-cream enjoys a thermal rationale for the change. In section IX, by way of a metaphoric inducement, the snowball leaps the partition of the thermal opposition and becomes a "hot" image: "pluck the melting sno-cone of the lightbulb." This melting process continues through section X, but not without contamination: "See the word made white & melting / before the turn of the fiery wheel." The heat here is *white* heat, i.e. the colour of snow. *Hell*, as a material signifier, can be traced in the word "wheel" which is constructed by a single letter prosthesis (w + heel) and by a single letter substitution ("e" replacing "l"). The snowball reappears, ideogrammatically this time, in "The world's meaning is exactly / fol de rol de rolly O." (We have already mentioned the introjected pictographic function of the O.) In the concluding command of this section ("Stamp the snow off your boots / onto the face of the rug") the last word echoes *rouge* (i.e. the red stitches of the snowball of section VI) whose semantic associations (through colour) lead back to red-heat-fire-Hell. In section XI, the snowball as egg reappears in a scene of word-play: "the egg ziled gods," whilst Hell inheres homophonically inbedded in the "ell" of the proper name "Nellie": *("Run for the roundhouse, Nellie, he cant corner you there")*. The triangle-cone development re-enters in the Empedoclean allusion ("Wear your best suit / when you jump into a volcano"). The *cano* in "volcano" continues another homophonic chain, inaugurated earlier with the phrase in section X: "I see the dog licking it up [i.e. the white word melting], / he turns & goes home, cano mirabilis." (The "I see" that begins this phrase further contaminates the heat/cold opposition in being the homophone of "icy.") "Dog" itself is a reverse form of "god" whose theologic meanings proliferate the poem. Section X, in fact, opens with "Et verbum cano factum est" and later (section XIX) will come the "Dog turds / discoloring the snow / about them." The volcano re-echoes in two phrases of section XII: "the perilous deterioration of dynamite" and more explicitly in the following (which also advances the contamination of the binary colours [red-white] and temperatures [hot-cold]): "On TV we sat breathless as death, / watching them blast the top off the mountain, // to begin, to make a perfect earth, a perfect smooth black orb."

This meticulous re-staging of images creates the effect of a weaving (the etymological source of the word "text") that promotes an undecidability between an abstract, formalist pattern and a shifting representational meaning. There is something in the above traced production that approximates both Freud's dream-work and the transformational grammar of Noam Chomsky. As if Bowering has shifted both of these as

methodologies to the literary order, where the focus is not on explicating the productional operation of the developing text, but on the spatio-temporal play of the surface, the implicative, transformational possibilities of the linguistic signs.[7] Also, Paul Valéry, in speaking on the nature of poetic images, makes mention of their "indefinitely repeated generation" in a system of "cyclical substitutions."[8] For Valéry, creativity and repetition are conjunctive but repetition is of a different order in *Allophanes*. The repetitions here are not of the nature of rhythms or rhymes, but profound disjunctions staged within the scene of the "other" writing. *Allophanes* is profoundly dialogic and its writing situates between two further

writings: a spectral, largely non-phonetic other, and a manifest, obsessive, compulsive writing of permutation and play. We must recall that the play of the same and the other is carried out upon a space of repetition that sets the grid for the series of spatio-temporal recurrences. The latter are less events whose existence registers as separate moments, than the consequences of the differential unwindings of writing's transformational operation. As linguistic imbeds inside floating contexts they are marked more by their high provisionality than by their fixing of meaning. What is produced is not a traceable theme but the graphic appearance of the *multiple* and the impossibility of the single instance. Through its succession of pages *Allophanes* asserts the impossibility of maintaining an identicality based on sameness. The matrix images of the snowball and of Hell do not inhere in any authenticating metaphor, nor find investment in a cumulative intention; they risk their discreteness scattered in the movement of the syntax *per se*. For syntax in *Allophanes* not only orders verbal groupings but superintends the multiplication of the repetitions. Moreover, as we have seen, these repetitions function as radical generative disjunctions and logical contaminants, which determine the semantic rhythm of the poem through its twenty-five sections.[9]

Allophanes is weighty in its insistence that we cannot write the word, only process it through a labyrinth of re-writings. Inverting itself to transmit the ground of its pre-suppositions as the *explicit* topography of its implications, *Allophanes* will leave, as a kind of residue or sediment, the space of spacing itself as the condition of the gaps that delineate the poem's discontinuities and the differential zones in which its transformations occur. Change, of this radical order, remains unassimilable in a reading. The

allophanic image, rising every morning at seven, shows itself *at every moment* to be irreducibly temporal and dialogic. Present only in its repetition[10] the word becomes sensed as a *betweenness*. A perpetual transformation along the lateral displacements of syntax of a graphic rhetoric whose line is extendable indefinitely. A mineral text?

* * *

GLOSSARY:

Allophane: *Min.* (mod. ad. Greek *allophanes*, appearing otherwise). A mineral classed by Dana as the first of his Sub-silicates; a hydrated silicate of alumina, with colour sky-blue, green, brown or yellow, which it loses under the blowpipe; whence the name.

Allophone: 1. A positional variant of a phoneme, which occurs in a specific environment and does not differentiate meaning.

2. Sound types which are members of a phoneme class; the individual sounds which compose a phoneme (such variation is sub-phonemic); a class of phones such that all are members of the same phoneme; they may occur in the same phonetic environment, or in different positions, with non-distinctive differences among them.

NOTES

1. From the jacket copy of *Allophanes* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1976). What is dictation if not the reverse movement of the sign? the inverse pattern of desire? Spicer's sentence will function as a remote control over the institution and arrangement of the signifiers. This, too, will constitute the textualization of an invisibility as the act of spacing; the supplementation of a *distance* by a *difference*, from a felt absence "present" to the space of absence itself.

2. Jean Paris, "The Writing Machine," *Sub-Stance*, No.16 (1977): p. 9.

3. Ibid., p. 11.

4. *Allophanes*, Section I.

5. We might note, in passing, that the cover in this way reveals its material *from the back*, i.e. the copulatory position of the Wolf Man's parents as Freud recounts it in his famous case history. See, Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *Standard Edition* ,tr. and ed. James Strachey, Vol. 17, pp. 1-122. It is also the direction of weaving (i.e. textuality). We will sense Freud throughout *Allophanes* as a voice beyond the absent one of Jack Spicer.

6. "Frivolity originates from the deviation or gap of the signifier, but also from its folding back on itself in its closed and representative identity" (Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac* ,tr. John P. Leavey, Jr. [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1980], p. 128).

7. Transformation is a relational operation that makes irrelevant the teleological pursuit of stasis or an originary point. As James Ogilvy describes it, "unlike the more familiar notion of analogy, transformation permits the more radical move toward taking the basic parameters themselves . . . as transforms of one another. Unlike symbolism and analogy, which tend to assume a basic or literal foundation on which an analogy is built or a symbol drawn, the concept of transformation assumes no fundamental dimension" (*Many Dimensional Man* [New York, 1977], pp. 46-47).

8. Paul Valéry, "The Idea of Art," tr. Ralph Manheim, in *Aesthetics*, ed. Harold Osborne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 29.

9. We might propose this as a scenario. The image, unable to "erase" itself, reproduces and then re-produces its reproduction, in this way resisting the creation of a unitary, *possessible* meaning.

10. Gilles Deleuze in *Logique du Sens* points to the nature of repetition in an inability to inaugurate exchange. Repetition is decidedly anti-metaphorical and utterly resistant to the substitutional strategies that would exchange it.

Manuscript: "Poems for the Vancouver Festival"

Poems For the Vancouver Festival

Start with a baseball diamond high
In the Runcible Mountain wilderness. Blocks
everywhere by stubborn lumber. Where even
the ocean cannot reach its coastline for
the lumber of islands or the river its mouth.
A perfect diamond, with a right field, center field
~~left~~ field of felled logs spreading vaguely
outward. Four aisles each
Facet of the diamond.
We shall a-build our city backwards from
each baseline extending like a square rays
from each distance you from the first-base
line, you from behind the second baseman, you
from behind the short stop, you from the third-
baseline.
We shall clear the trees back, the lumber of our
pasts and futures back, because we are on
a diamond, because it is our diamond
Pushed forward from.
And our city shall stand as the lumber rots
and Runcible mountain crumbles, and the
resurgeating all of islands, comes to
meet us.

The Frazier River was discovered by mistake
it being thought to have been, like all
British Columbia,
Further south than it was.
You are going south looking for a drinking fountain
I am going north looking for the source of
the chill in my bones.
The three main residential streets of Los
Angeles were once called Faith, Hope,
and Charity. They changed Faith to
Flower and Charity to Grand but left
Hope. You can sometimes see it still
in the shimmering smog of unwillingness
Figueroa
Was named after a grasshopper.
You are going south looking for a drinking fountain
I am going north looking for the source of
the chill in my bones
Our hearts, hanging below like balls, as
they brush each other in our separate
journeys
Pivot for a moment the idiocy of age and
direction.
You are going south looking for a drinking
fountain
I am going north looking for the source of the chill in my bones

Nothing but the last sun falling in the last
oily water by the docks
They fed the lambs sugar all winter
Nothing but that. The last sun
falling in the last oily water by the docks.

W it is the only barrier between ourselves
and them.
"Fifty four forty or fight," we say
holding a gun, banding our teeth.
There is still a landscape I live on. Trees
Growing where trees shouldn't be. No
trees growing where trees are. A mess
Of nature. Inconvenient
To the pigs and goins and cows
Of all these settlers.
Settling itself down
In a dirt solution
The water is not alive
In the testube.

The Beatles, devoid of form and color,
but full of images playoutside in
the living room.
Vancouver parties. Too late
Too late
For a nice exit,
Old Simon Fraser, who was called
Frazer in an earlier poem
Played with it
Pretended not to discover a poem.
The boats really do go to China
If one can discover that harbor
Far, far from any thought of harbor
Seagoing, graying.

Guying the message like a seagull
~~circling~~ circling about a dead piece of bait
Out there on the pier – it's been there
for hours – the cats and the seagulls fight over it.
The seagull with only one leg, remote
From identification. Anyway
They're only catching shrimp.
The character out there on the pier,
the kid in blue jeans, the occasional
old-age pensioner.
The gull alone there on the pier, the one
leg
The individual
Moment of truth that it could lure.
Dead bait.

It then becomes a matter of not
Only not knowing but not feeling. Can
A place in the wilderness become utterly
buggered up with usage? A question
Of [illegible].
They
Come out of the mountains and they come in by ship
And Victoria fights New Westminster, and
They're all at the same game. Trapped
By mountains and ocean. Only
A wash on themselves. The seatides
Do not do their bidding or the mountain
winds; there is
No end to the islands. Diefenbacker
Addresses us with a parched face. He
Is, if anything, what
[illegible] will bring us. Love
Of this our land, [illegible].

LARRY PRICE

Edit is Act: Some Measurements for *Content's Dream* *

Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984
Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986
by Charles Bernstein

In writing 'on' *Content's Dream* the temptation is to narrativize the essays, to write 'then, and then, and then'. In that sense, the title is as emblematic as the literal beginning it makes of the literal matter at hand: language. For when Robert Creeley writes that "one tends to value any kind of statement for what one can take from it as a content," one certainly agrees, and with the understanding that Bernstein's reversal gives—i.e., the condition one *has* of content. The qualification of experience (dream) is in the possessive. Beginning at Bottom, as Erica Hunt has put it. If language is the content, "we" and "I" are not.

* * *

"WE"

These essays are frequently the in-print fallout from public and oral presentations. There is, then, an uncertain conflict between the obvious projected values of writing (writing is a private act in a public mode) and the incontrovertible public fact: living speaker, the compaction of the audience, elbow to squared knees, its distractions, coughs, shuffles, scraped chairs, late

---

* "Edit is act," from "Substance Abuse," in *Islets/irritations* (New York: Jordon Davies, 1983), paraphrases a sentence ("Editing is act") from Barrett Watten's "Writing and Capitalism," in *THE L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E BOOK*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1984), p. 170.

arrivals, heads turning, etc., the rapidity of delivery, Bernstein's methodical disjunction. So that his

> vision of a constructive writing practice . . . of a multi-discourse text . . . many . . . modes of language in the same "hyper-space" . . . (p. 227)

of necessity sets loose among phenomenal stops, individual terms, one at a time, in which none stands as unifying, but instead dis-establishes the others' claim on the whole. This "we" is Olson's "we," "Polis / is eyes" where "sees" is not Zukofsky's "clear sight as against the erring brain" but a function of what can be actualized in *language* :

> Poetry, centered on the condition of its wordness . . . .
>
> Language is commonness in being . . . .
>
> It is through language that we experience the world . . . .
>
> We are born into language . . . .
>
> Language is the first technology . . . .

Language (and any model projected within it) is pluralized in accordance with time. The result is a pressure applied within extreme formal alternations. Resolutions are never more than partial (usually in the form of reservations about others' extreme positions) and even then continually undercut, so that what Bernstein *does* establish is the *self-evidence* of literary values projected in their material reconstitution in writing. Form is held to as the ability to have effect, and "we" stands forth as a hyper-illuminated language sensorium actualized in the extended reading.

* * *

"I"

Clearly, then, language is not a 'monad' that, once inflated, stabilizes other unknowns. Language is an act and as such compounds itself (it walks, talks, walking, talks, talking, etc.). Within an active definition of its limits, those limits dissolve into the overall and plural emplacement within language's material, social and economic base:

> it's not that aesthetic consciousness & political consciousness are essentially different, quite the opposite, but really this is the goal: reunification—in practice—of what we now face as multiple demands. the power of poetry is, indeed, to bridge this gap . . . by providing instances of actualization . . . but, sadly, for us, now, no *maker* is able to reap the legitimate rewards of his or her labor. & so our responsibilities remain multiple & we are called on to fulfill all of them. (p. 31)

This injunction carries with it the problem of a view of

> Meaning, coherence, truth projected "out there" as something we know not for ourselves but as taught to us . . . (An imperial clarity for an imperial world.) An official version of reality. (p. 25)

The irony is that within such a view the "I" it vaunts is actually marginalized within its multiplication as one among other isolated units. A view of language as conduit disallows the reconstitutive force of writing. Against this, Bernstein argues for *argument*, talking back as against "the worship of solitude." Bernstein's is the composite sense of the writer as involved in the multiple theses of an overdetermined present, involved socially in fragmentation, giving up to that, taking the social debt on fully, if critically, and so transforming it and the alienated particulars of it. In this, Bernstein demonstrates that the partial intention of the social debt is "language removed from the participatory control of its users & delivered into the hands of the state," and that, quoting Barthes, ideology is the cinema of society and everywhere present. But for Bernstein it is just the fact of a pervasive, inescapable ideology that gives the writer force: "we are each involved in the constitution of language . . . our actions reconstitute—change—reality" (p. 26).

But there is equally a trap in that "each." It is not simply a case of a writing making sense only to its writer. Ideology is not a lie but a fact whose truth is its transformation:

> The myth of subjectivity and its denigration as mere idiosyncracy—impediments to be overcome—diffuses the inherent power in the commonness of our alienation: that rather than being something that separates us, alienation is the source of our commonness . . . . The poetic response to the imposition of an imperial reality has been to define subjectivity, by a kind of Nietzschean turn around, not as 'mere' but as exalted. The image of the poet as loner & romantic . . . only the private & individual is real. Beat—to abstract & project a stance, acknowledging the

> injury this does to the actual poetry—is an obvious example, as is Surrealism . . . grounded in reaction. (p. 27)

But

> the promise of the return of the world can be (& has always been) fulfilled by poetry . . . Poetry, centered on the condition of its wordness—words of a language not out there but in here, language the place of our commonness . . . . i'm not saying the "private" literary activity is separable from the "public" conduct. i'm saying a person's got a variety of responsibilities . . . it's not that aesthetic consciousness & political consciousness are essentially different, quite the opposite, but really this is the goal: reunification—in practice—of what we now face as multiple demands. the power of poetry is, indeed, to bridge this gap . . . by providing instances of actualization . . . but, sadly, for us, now, no *maker* is able to reap the legitimate rewards of his or her labor. & so our responsibilities remain multiple & we are called on to fulfill all of them. (pp. 29-31)

Consequently, Bernstein's critical texts, rather than attempting to 'describe' writing—his, others', or all—is much more an effort to make space, or space as sense in which to breathe, perhaps less deeply and with less detail, but nonetheless with a key as to how that does occur in the writing itself. The bricoleur is one term of this, but again scepticism leads it even further. Rather than a simple provisional sense of method, the complete refusal of closure insists upon continuous qualification, a progression from one form to the next, and an irresolution of meaning. It is this progression that brings Bernstein to note

> some value still in the author function . . . the "I" in a text operates as a very pertinent measure of the constituting capacity of language . . . . Formally, the "I" allows the course of formative capacities to be scanned . . . . I want to show that "I" as a social construction, a *product* of language and not a pre-existing entity outside it; that "I" is first a "we." (p. 410)

* * *

"ACT"

If there is an inherent vacillation, it is where the intellectual 'acts out'. In Bernstein's method, it is there in the understanding that any ground for use

is a thoroughly overdetermined one: the desire for reunification in language is in perpetual conflict with the plural present. It is possible then to see "language" as a compost heap of dead ideas "in which present . . . writing grows." The lived mass of writing then actually has as upper limit *act* ("one idea following instanter on another"), consummate motion in language, self-evident seams ("let the roots dangle" and "Edit is act"), and as lower limit "dead ideas . . . comprising an historical unconscious." Within this lower limit the major prop is what Bernstein calls "ideational mimesis," but for which the portrait perpetually will not hold. In Bernstein's poetics of act, thinking "consists not in representations of concepts but in a fabric or nexus of relations. Ideas are always syntactic" (p. 364) and syntax, as brushstrokes for Jasper Johns, is simply a means for getting from one side of the page to the other. Its combinatory makes active space for living, thinking flesh, all transformative hands and feet within phenomenal stops.

* * *

"EDIT"

The progression, then, is from an "I" ('acting out' within an alienation of place and time, the ahistorical loner) through *act* toward an historical collectivity *in* language, a "we" as the active, argumentative agents *in use* as against an "us" fused within a stasis of agreement. In this connection, "Conspiracies," the title of the fourth section to *Content's Dream*, is intriguing, again suggesting, as so many other elements, a mutuality of production in language, among the others also there ("It is the touch of others that is the givenness of language . . . not telling another what she or he does not know but a resonating [articulating] of the space in which both are enwrapped [enraptured]"). Further, this welter of intentions suggests that literature is just such a formation of attachments and oppositions with and within a possible past, present, and future. Thus:

> In Coolidge, the experience captured is the one set down, internal to the individual poem, to . . . its limits . . . the reality of the experience during it. What this process reveals is that which is intended . . . that which is human and which is particular of each human. (p. 260)

In tandem with this, Bernstein makes this argument which, for me, is more compelling than any strict 'reader-centered' argument:

> In contrast to the predetermined interpretations of a text based on the primacy of the self or of logic, it is the formal autonomy of the text as model that elicits a response, an interpolation. Its presence demands that I measure my relation to it, compute its scale. It is never incomplete or sealed off. Its completeness consists of its inclusiveness. Its autonomy is not of the self or logic but of nature, the world. Its truth is not assumed but made. (p. 236)

However, Bernstein's scepticism again pushes to the obverse. After quoting Stanley Cavell ("The camera has been praised for extending the senses; it may as the world goes, deserve more praise for confining them, leaving room for thought"—*The Claim of Reason*), Bernstein opposes that thought to what could be a cinematic metaphor for Coolidge's writing:

> As the screen becomes bigger, it diminishes the sense of looking through a hole and begins to feel like the very immersion—thrownness—into sensation from which film offers relief/release. (p. 98)

Even so, the image has as its "upper limit object idealization and its lower limit blankness," which suggests the "inadequacy of our frames of reference to do any more than skim on the surface of phenomena." This is true but also assumes those frames to be stable, whereas between the poles of idealization and blankness are delimited and particular models, material in their particularity and so susceptible to decay, breakdown, or self-negation. And it is possible to see these—decay, breakdown, and negativity—as giving access—entry and exit—to the world, a multiplication of points of contact with and within it. In this reading, Bernstein's sceptical pluralism is less a forced hand with its only ground in historical tragedy and more a positive, if provisional, method of actualization of the historical present.

Although overall this *is* the argument of *Content's Dream*, Bernstein remains equivocal. Again he quotes Cavell:

> "In Wittgenstein's view the gap between the mind and the world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular forms of human life, human 'convention'. This implies that the *sense* of gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a 'stranger' to, 'alienated' from) those shared forms of life, to give up the responsibility of their maintenance."
>
> (Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 105)

Which may be true, but Bernstein must account for "the erection of the Theater of Representation in the place of production" (p. 178). In fact, Bernstein does note that "Wittgenstein and Cavell seem . . . cautionary and conservative . . . because they locate value totally within the context of use and production," but by locating the sole alternative in Deleuze and Guattari (only to dismiss that alternative), Bernstein's argument here seems reductive. In fact, noting Cavell's as well as Wittgenstein's silence on political and economic interests embodied within conventions, Bernstein elsewhere projects his thinking toward a *reconstitution* of our frames and models. And again, this comes down to responsibility. It is not

> that our losses are . . . based on the conceptual impossibility of presence . . . but rather on grounds that each person must take responsibility for—the failure to make ourselves present to each other . . . . (p. 182)

However, Bernstein is very clear as to the point of this equivocation:

> In talking about language and thinking I want to establish the *material*, the stuff, of writing, in order, in turn, to base a discussion of writing on its medium rather than on preconceived literary ideas of subject matter or form. (p. 62)

This concern swamps 'material'/'formal' oppositions, instead

> allowing for writing to be put together in continuously 'new' ways—how various shapes and modes and syntaxes create not alternate paraphrases of the same things but different entities entirely. Grains of mind. The desire for writing to be the end of its own activity, its very thatness . . . the text becoming viscerally present . . . the 'content' and the 'experience of reading' are collapsed onto each other, the content being the experience of reading, the consciousness of the language and its movement and sound . . . . (pp. 68-69)

But although Bernstein notes a particular path in "phonemes turning to morphemes turning to words turning to phrases turning to 'poem'," there is a larger dimension actualized at the level of intention: "the intending rather than assuming of order . . . ." By structuring the poem from the material (if alienated) particulars outward to form (rather than beginning with a core unity, Bernstein establishes unlimited access to a total public field of information. "Edit is act" is the appropriate motto for that access, where

in the end the poem stands as another particular being, hence object, like myself, in the world, and I beside it. And I return not to myself "as some egocentric center, but experience myself as *in* the world, that with the meaning and limits therein revealed I have also placed myself. (p. 71)

DIANE RELKE

Articulating Female

In the Feminine:
Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots
Conference Proceedings 1983
Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1985

Edited by Ann Dybikowski, Victoria Freeman,
Daphne Marlatt, Barbara Pulling and Betsy Warland

This is an important collection of papers, and it deserves more than a review. It deserves to be studied closely by every woman (and man) in Canada who writes. In a sense, this unilingual edition of the 1983 Women and Words conference proceedings resolves, through translation, the inherent doubleness of the Canadian voice.[1] What emerges, however, is a multiplicity of female voices—voices that are often unapologetically partisan, passionate, and subjective. The book derives its power from these qualities.

Having attended a few of the seminars at the Women and Words conference, I would guess that the editors have done a good job of selecting some of the best papers for inclusion. None of the less impressive papers I heard is published here. I especially appreciate the translations of several French texts. There were some problems with translation at the conference: translators were in short supply, and simultaneous translation of the highly literary pieces proved intractable. Although the papers are divided into six groups there's a lot of conversation going on across the sections. Section I, "The Social Context for Women's Writing," includes formal papers on the relationship between politics and literature, class analysis as a tool for obtaining access to women's writing, and less formal pieces on writing as a political act against violence against women. Section II, "Writing Against Double Colonization," includes papers by members of visible and not so visible "ethnic" minorities. Statements by women who have succeeded in combining motherhood and a literary career are contained in Section III. Sections IV and V, which make up half the book, are devoted largely to women's attempts to reclaim language and the ways in which those

attempts have been and should be received by scholars and critics. The final section, "Getting Women's Voices Heard," deals with women's publishing and theatre production.

Each of the editors contributes a short introductory statement. In the first of these, Daphne Marlatt outlines the volume's common ground:

> The message seems to be, quite plainly: women are tired of being left out of the cultural mainstream, of seeing their work overlooked, their voices silenced; they are tired of having their primary life–concerns dismissed as peripheral to the "real (male) world"; they are tired of being constantly placed "over there," labelled as militant or Third World or lesbian, little signs hung on their work to defuse, minimize, and otherwise muffle what they have to say. The biggest label, of course, being "female."

But the reader who's looking for more female consensus than this won't find it. The volume is as much (perhaps more) concerned with divisive issues within the female literary community. For example, as Marlatt points out, the theme of exclusion is common to several papers: "familiar with being excluded from the culture at large, women are quick to sense when they are being excluded by other women.

> So there is the issue of whether or not one woman can speak for other women, whether she is a Black woman speaking for all Black women...or a white middle-class woman speaking for "all" women....There is the issue of whether or not "academic" theory and a specialized critical language is relevant to women who read to understand their lives....Rifts occur along the lines of class, colour, sexual preference, and ('ethnic') culture.

This is just a sample of the many forms which exclusion takes in the volume. It's a theme worth noting because many of the most important issues raised are directly or indirectly related to it. Further, the way in which women confront one another on the question of exclusion reveals the spirit of collective self–examination which informed the conference. This review will also commit the patriarchal sin of exclusion by focusing almost exclusively on Sections IV and V. My (weak) excuse for this is the limits of space. A more important reason is the fact that Section IV, "Constructing and Deconstructing: Feminist Critical Theory," is by far the longest section (which suggest that this is where the primary interest of the editors lies), and that Section V, "Writing in the Feminine: Language and Form," supports and augments the call in Section IV for an authoritative feminist literary critique based on French language theory.

The inclusion of so many papers reflecting the whole spectrum of opinion on the future of feminist literary scholarship in Canada reflects, I believe, the chronic crisis in English Canadian criticism. Section IV is inspired in large part by the banality of much mainstream criticism in English—including much feminist criticism.[2] Were there an eclectic body of critical approaches being practised in Canada, these scholars wouldn't need to draw attention to the application of invalid criteria to women's texts. Nor would they need to fear the kind of academic nest-feathering which has traditionally fuelled the proliferation of theories employing high-tech jargon—theories which compete not only with one another but also with the writing they purport to illuminate.

In "Feminist Criticism as Creative Process," Louise Forsyth's emphasis is on the invention of a unique (and presumably single) approach which will result from the critic's active participation in the texts she reads:

> I consider the role of the critic to be, above all, that of serious and appreciative reader....She must seek to understand the text she is reading and the language used by its author in order to talk about it on its own terms, without applying criteria that are quite invlaid for the text, as too often happens when the literary establishment reads and interprets a woman's text....By letting it be known in her writing where she is coming from and why she must invent new critical tools in order to read a woman's text well, she does good critical work, and she also throws into relief the unacknowledged biases inherent in accepting literary and critical practices.

As Andrea Lebowitz suggests in "The Danger of Creating Another Literati," this invention of appropriate critical tools for the illumination of women's texts can serve two distinctly different ends, depending upon whom the text is being illuminated for:

> Academic critics, and all critics I think, are faced with a dilemma, to wit, as we have entered this sophisticated literary discourse, driven by our own need to know, we have developed highly theoretical models—but have we left behind the ordinary reader?...Are we in danger of creating another literati speaking only to the initiates who understand the lingo? I feel this is a danger among academic critics, who have a need to prove their stuff as academics, to be acceptable, not to be reductive, not to bowdlerize the texts.

Many feminist critics have ascended into the rarified air of pure theory where it's not only the "ordinary reader" who gets left behind but often the literary

text itself. But this concern might make us wonder if the woman who "reads books for pleasure, for escape, for instruction, all the old reasons, and who wants to talk about them" ever gets the chance to read literary criticism anyway. Yet, if we consider the information in Lois Pike's "A Selective History of Feminist Presses and Periodicals," it becomes apparent that women publishers have been struggling for a long time to establish outlets for literature and criticism, and that these outlets have the potential for breaking down the alienation between women inside and outside the Canadian academy. Highly complex theoretical approaches, while they will help to enliven the dialogue within the academic community, may well perpetuate that alienation.

Lorraine Weir ("'Wholeness, Harmony, Radiance' and Women's Writing") doesn't share Forsythe's and Lebowitz's sense of responsibility toward a wider female audience. Weir suggests that making women's texts accessible does violence to them: "I wonder about the criterion of accessibility and...about all the hermetic texts in women's literature and about what we do when we open them out, making an often bitterly private tradition into a public one—public on Narcissus's terms" (i.e., terms established by mainstream patriarchal critics). Accessibility is a value cherished by mainstream critics, and by making accessibility the goal of feminist criticism, Weir seems to be suggesting, feminist critics identify themselves with that mainstream. "Wholeness" and "harmony" are the literary standards, drawn from male writing, against which women's texts are measured. In the interest of making those often fragmented and discontinuous texts accessible, these standards are inappropriately imposed upon them. Rather than approaches whose aim is accessibility, "we need to critique the very concept of wholeness which in all its forms has held us captive, often unknowingly complicit.

> For as long as we see the "half–saying," the concealed or unspoken subtexts, the use of symbol and rhetoric of camouflage as incomplete, partial, and imperfect "half–life," we are still participating in the judgements of Narcissus....Those who would dismiss theory because of its difficulty or inaccessibility fall victim to the same arguments which have been used against women's writing.

France Theoret's sometimes cryptic "Territories of Criticism," while it agrees that only theory can account for certain dimensions of women's writing, suggests that she might be suspicious of the meta–theory Weir proposes—a theory that would critique established critique instead of literature. What Theoret seems to be advancing (although it's not entirely clear) is a kind of critical eclecticism which anglo–Canadian feminist

scholarship might well benefit from. She points out that criticism should take into account that women's writing is always affected by the conditions of women's lives, and, more important, she also reminds us that citicism is always less than the writing it critiques:

> Critical language is a form of discourse, which is to say that it cannot entirely convey the phenomenon of writing, which is a totalising phenomenon. Writing contains elements of both instinct and rationality. There is a whole dimension of the work of writing that criticism can account for only through theory (the word comes from reflection) or through a memesis of the text. Journalistic criticism, however, is ill–adapted to mimetic writing, which easily leads to preciosity and all the pitfalls of paraphrase.

Theoret also recognizes the limitations of adopting one mode of critical discourse, "for to engage in one discourse is to set aside another or to keep other dimensions at a distance....Writing in the feminine is a plural language and it is necessary to aim for a pluralistic logic if we are to give an account of it."

Implict in Barbara Godard's "Writing and Difference" is a definition of anglo–Canadian women's writing as transparent and Quebec women's writing as opaque (if those terms can be used metaphorically). Atwood's fiction is cited as representative of women's writing in English in that it demonstrates a "retreat from the logos and the word into sensation, finding refuge in prelinguistic forms of communication...." Godard notes in Atwood a "desire for a transparent language which would represent and transpose a preexisting reality...." In contrast to this transparency of and retreat from language is the work of Nicole Brossard which is representative of Quebec women's writing and which "substitutes for [the transposition of a preexisting reality] an emphasis on reading (and unreading), that is, the re–tracing of writing which is itself the trace of other activities.

> Always doubled, language is incapable of translating any pre–existent signified. It can refer only to itself....Brossard plays games with the reader, actively directing her to interpret the text and deconstruct the poetic figures through which we represent reality. Writing is not transcription but inscription, a means of resisting language through a foregrounding of process.

In Brossard, as in many Quebec women writers, "one encounters puns, ellipses, changes in gender and spelling, neologisms, typographic variants, the use of the white page—all techniques which foreground the material fact of the book in the acts of writing and reading." If Godard's generalizations

are correct, one has to wonder what the puns, ellipses, typographical variants, and the use of white space mean in the work of Margaret Avison, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Tostevin, Smaro Kamboureli, Phyllis Webb, Betsy Warland, Dorothy Livesay, Sharon Thesen, etc., etc., as well as in the poetry (as opposed to the fiction) of Atwood. But if women's language in English Canada really *is* largely "transparent" and unconcerned with writing as process, then the critical modes presently in operation are probably sufficient for illuminating anglophone women's texts.

Daphne Marlatt's "musing with mothertongue," Betsy Warland's "surrendering the english language," and Nicole Brossard's "Tender Skin My Mind" all reflect a profound commitment to the concept of "writing the body" which informs French feminist language theory. In addition to what "writing the body" has come to mean for heterosexual adherents of the principles of *écriture féminine* (see Louise Cotnoir's "The Imaginary Body"), for these three writers the concept is conterminous with their lesbianism. I take these writers to mean that the only authentically female language is *literally* the lesbian language of love because like lesbian sexuality this language excludes men. As Nicole Brossard explains it, lesbians bring themselves "literally into the world....

> When I say that we literally bring outselves into the world, I really and truly mean literally. *Literal* means what is represented by letters. It is what is taken as the letter. Now we take as the letter what our bodies are, our skin, sweat, pleasure, sensuality, enjoyment. These are the first letters which form the beginnings of our texts.

Curiously, this contradicts Godard's perception of Brossard's writing, for literalization creates the illusion of bridging the gap between language and its referents. Warland expresses it as "our skin's syntax, our desire's etymologies." However, she's not concerned with creating new language but with rescuing language from its patriarchal encumbrances by returning to original etymologies. Marlatt talks about "a living body of verbal relations. Articulation: seeing the connections (& the thigbone & the hipbone, etc.). Putting the living body of language together...." This concept of turning female flesh into language seems to be an ironic reversal of "the Word made Flesh," a notion at the heart of the patriarchal language of the Bible. While this dream of an exclusively female language is in itself liberating, it's not a dream shared by all feminists within the school of French language theory. For example, Monique Wittig "rejects the goal of creating a separate 'woman's language.'...To abandon language because it presently reflects masculinist structures is to abandon transformation of all sexist structures in favour of a marginal women's culture."[3]

It's hardly surprising that this radical creation of language out of female flesh and lesbian eroticism should have its source in French language theory, and that these theories are slow to catch on in English, for there's no way out of genderized nouns and gender agreement in French (in German, a third category of neuter nouns diffuses, if only slightly, the extreme polarization of male and female and gives women writers in that language a way of avoiding gender encoded expression.) Here, Louky Bersianik explains the linguistic relationship between masculine and feminine:

> When the one (masculine) appears, the other (feminine) disappears. In the retirement of old people (*vieux*), old ladies (*vieilles*) are erased; in the union of newly–weds (*époux*), the bride (*épouse*) is soon effaced....In short, the feminine is that gender which is sacrificed to another...("Women's Work")

Sexism in the English language seems minimal by comparison, as in this example offered by Marlatt:

> can a pregnant woman be said to be "master" of the gestation process she finds herself within—is that her relationship to it? are women included in the statement "God appearing as man"? (has God ever appeared as a woman?) can a woman say she is "lady of all she surveys" or could others ever say of her she "ladies it over them"?

or in this passage by Warland:

> ...i became angry at the sexism within dictionary definitions... what we find in *Webster's Thrid New International Dictionary* ...is that all positive examples of the usage of this word are male, and all the negative examples female. for instance; (in reference to human character and disposition): "It was his nature to look after others" and "Devotion that was not in her nature to return."

If the creation of a new, exclusively female language through the deconstruction of an old, phallogocentric one isn't as widespread in English Canada as it is in Quebec, where, as Gwladys Downes tells us ("Contrasts in Psychic Space"), there's been the additional problem of "one totally dominant religion [that] was almost co–terminous with language," it's because sexist idiomatic expressions (such as those Marlatt cites) can often be avoided, and dictionaries can be (and are being) rewritten. But how can one avoid erasing *vieilles* from *vieux*? No wonder Bersianik laments that the French language

> ...is, alas, neither a broken pitcher nor a car motor. The manufacturing defect lies at the very heart of the mechanism. The time is ripe to replace this completely out-dated model with a new one! We must reconstruct each and every part, and reassemble these parts in the form of a new machinery.

As the work of Marlatt and Warland suggests, despite a slow start, that "new machinery" is being assembled by anglo-Canadian writers as well. But given the profound self-questioning among French feminists around the issues of *écriture féminine*, one wonders if perhaps Canada is the only place left where enthusiasm for this aesthetic is still on the rise.

Barbara Godard's "The Translator as She" adds an essential dimension to the discussion of reclaiming and recreating language and the need for critical tools which will help us understand this process. The paper sheds some much needed light on the role of the translator by questioning the time-honoured perception of translation as a "secondary activity, as a mechanical rather than a creative process." The traditional notion of the translator as invisible drudge is absent in this description of the translation experience:

> ...most of the bliss of the language is that of the translator's, as the edge of her idiolect comes up against that of the author's style. For it is the author who has taken the risks of creation, expounded the ideas, plot and characters, and made a dangerous expedition into the unknown, bringing forth her insights for the scrutiny of the world.
>
> The shadows over the pleasure stem from the nature of the relationship between translator and writer, who are doubles, with the psychic danger this entails, the translator being the monster. Instead, I like to imagine the translator as ventriloquist, as accomplice. Both analogies underline the complicity of writer and translator; both point to the somewhat subversive activity of translation, the copying/stealing of an original work of art.

These lines can't help but recall Louis Forsyth's definition of the critic as an active participator in the text, a reader who "enjoys[s] and vibrate[s] with its creative power." Indeed, the concept of translation as a special kind of criticism is implicit throughout the paper.

The translator gets to know (in ways the critic generally doesn't) the extent to which female expression is alienated from "received" modes of discourse:

> In the course of translating the works of women writers, I have been pushed into an active relationship with their words. For these are writers consciously attempting to find new sources of meaning for women within language....In no way could their works be translated with the simple help of a dictionary, for the meanings I was to recode were not to be found there.

This recalls Betsy Warland's frustration with the dictionary, which for her is a reference guide to a foreign language. Godard also explains that while much gets lost in translation, there are also gains, for "in the reading which [a translator] gives to the text and fixes in the permanency of another language, the original text may well find itself clarified or enlarged." Godard quotes a passage from Nicole Brossard's journal which records her reaction to reading herself in translation; this passage corroborates the view of translation as a different order of criticism: "what we [writers] choose to hide in the text must now be unveiled. What the critic...can only presume, dream or imagine as the meaning in what she reads, the translator seeks to clarify." Lorraine Weir might not appreciate the accessibility which the translator's art can effect.

Somewhere just below or above the crossfire of debate in Section IV, Smaro Kamboureli ("Dialogue with the Other") transfuses some desperately needed life into what has come to be known as Canadian myth criticism. While recognizing (as traditional myth critics rarely do) the diversity of women's poetry in English Canada, she notes that "one of the factors that brings all these women together, that erases their otherness as writers, is their evocative and connotative use of myth.

> I first became aware of this when...I reviewed *D'Sonoqua: Women Poets from B.C.* I noticed in this anthology that poets...had a common point of reference: myth as an alternate language, as a language that goes through words beyond words, towards the roots of their common feminine selfhood. This pull between feminine creativity and myth became more apparent for me when I read Emily Carr's *Klee Wyck.* There I saw Carr's discovery of and attraction to D'Sonoqua, the West Coast Indian goddess, who gave her name to the anthology....

This suggestion that myth "goes through words, beyond words" complements Godard's observation of the female retreat from language. It also expands that observation by pointing out that myth is itself a language and that the departure from patriarchal language is also an arrival at female language. And this, in turn, echoes Warland's journey back through the patriarchal overtones of language to the etymological origins of words.

Emily Carr's experience, as Kamboureli cleary suspects (and perhaps knows for sure), was itself a journey back through male interpretation: ethnographer Franz Boas, translating the story of *Dzo'noq!wa* as told him by his male Kwakiutl Indian sources, represents D'Sonoqua as the destroyer of children—the stereotypical witch/bitch/demon who haunts the male imagination.[4] Carr, breaking through this male "myth of unreality," arrives at that place Kamboureli identifies as "the space where the different faces of the self encounter each other." As Kamboureli notes, Carr captures the spirit of the Indian goddess "in its many forms."

Women poets' deconstruction of mythical material "break[s] down the dialectic patterns that have thwarted women's creativity, and open[s] up a dialogic relationship between the feminine imagination and the world that surrounds it.

> The dialogic form that feminine experience tends to take in poetry enables women poets to demythologize the attitudes that have constricted their creative energy. Through their connotative use of myth, women poets engage themselves in an on–going dialogue with the world around them, thus re–locating themselves in a tradition that has both excluded and coerced their presence. Their dialogic discourse operates according to the principle of difference rather than the principle of opposition.

This dialogic discourse with its emphasis on difference rather than opposition turns the traditionally opposed elements of "good/evil; innocence/guilt; logos/eros; man/woman" into complementary rather than antagonistic pairs. Unlike the language which is the goal of *écriture féminine*, this is a female language of inclusion rather than exclusion.

Besides those mentioned above, there are excellent papers in this collection by Phyllis Webb, Gail Scott, Marian Engel, Joan Haggerty, Shirley Neuman, and several others. The volume deserves a place on the reading list of every course in feminist literary critique offered in Canadian universities. It contains many photographs of the authors taken at the Women and Words Conference, and the conference program is reprinted here, so the book also serves as a souvenir of an important literary event. All in all, *In the Feminine* is well worth its cover price of $9.50.

NOTES

1. "*Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots*, held June 30 - July 3, 1983 in Vancouver, British Columbia, brought together over 1,000 anglophone and francophone women involved in traditional and alternative forms of literary activity. The conference was conceived as a cross-cultural forum in which women could explore the traditions and context of our work with words, discuss existing power structures and the creation of alternative ones, and look at new directions evident in women's writing, criticism and cultural organizing" (p. 9).

2. "Mainstream" Canadian criticism has been undergoing profound change since the beginning of the decade, although in 1983, when the Women and Words conference took place, this transformation was perhaps not quite so apparent as it is today. Critics who were thought to be on the fringes in the 1970s have now become mainstream, and the absence of a critical eclecticism that characterized the era of so-called "thematic" criticism is now on its way to becoming the norm.

3. Diane Griffin Crowder, "Amazons and Mothers: Monique Wittig, Helene Cixous and Theories of Women's Writing," *Contemporary Literature* 24:2 (1983), 127.

4. "Dzo'noq!a," *Kwakiutl Texts*, Franz Boas and George Hunt, eds. (New York: G.E. Stechert, 1902), pp. 507–8.

BOOKS RECEIVED

From time to time, *Line* receives review copies of books that deserve extended commentary, but unfortunately our pool of writing readers is not large enough to handle more than a few of them. Perhaps this list will stir up some interest from readers. All serious inquiries will be given serious attention.

B.S.Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (New Directions,1985), 192 pp. "Christie is a simple man. It does not take him long to realize that he has not been born into money. So Christie places himself next to it by taking a job in a bank and it is there that he encounters the principles of Double-Entry Bookkeeping and adapts them in his own fashion to settle his account with society." This title is the first in the plan of New Directions to bring the avant-garde writing of the late B.S. Johnson (1933-73) to the attention of North American readers.

William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (New Directions,1985), ed. with an introduction by Charles Tomlinson, 302 pp. The poems included are selected from all the major books and arranged in chronological order. Tomlinson, the British poet who has championed Williams's work in England for many years, has made choices that "trace Williams's search for a poetry that lives and works in the American idiom." More comprehensive and accurate than Randall Jarrell's *Selected Poems* (1963), this selection—given the limits of any selection—manages to encompass the range of Williams's accomplishments as poet.

William Carlos Williams, *Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets*, edited with an introduction by James Breslin (New Directions, 1985), 256 pp. A collection of Williams's scattered essays on two generations of poets following him, those he encouraged and advised... Rexroth, Zukofsky, Levertov, Ginsberg and others. "What might have been a random collection of occasional pieces achieves remarkable coherence from the singleness of Williams's poetic vision: his belief that the secret spirit of the ritual, of poetry, was trapped in restrictive molds, and, if these could be broken, the spirit would be able to live again in a new, contemporary form."

Miriam Mandel, *The Collected Poems of Miriam Mandel*, ed. Sheila Watson (Longspoon & NeWest, 1984), 326 pp. "What we have here is not really a collection of poetry, but something now frequently called a long or serial poem, inscribed, as it were, in the margin of another (an/other) text.

The poem speaks both of enclosure and of exclusion, of a locking in and a locking out, of implication in a textual death, of delimitation, and of an enforced marginality which it can elude or escape only by brinkmanship or by transgression. Forestalled by the rhetoric of passion, confronted by images of its own condition, shrouded for periods in clinical silence, it does not flinch from exposing the neutralizing banality that attempts to appease it. The poem is not a confession. It is a disclosure, the necessary deconstruction of any comforting evasion" (from the Introduction by Sheila Watson). This impressive gathering of poems by Mandel—from 1969 when she began writing to the time of her death on February 13, 1982—includes many poems previously unpublished, the last dated January 8, 1982.

Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik, eds. *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature* (NeWest, 1985), 303 pp. ". . . a collection of seventeen essays on Canadian literature, written by European critics representing seven countries. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the essays represent seventeen different critical approaches. What they have in common is their intellectual energy, their curiosity about a new literature, and their stimulating combination of scholarship and insight" (from the Preface by Robert Kroetsch). The reader also finds a useful bibliography of criticism on Canadian writing by European critics.

OTHER RECOMMENDED TITLES (for 1985-86):

Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Noman's Land* (Coach House, 1985), 138 pp.
Sarah Sheard, *Almost Japanese* (Coach House, 1985), 125 pp.
James Laughlin, *Selected Poems* (City Lights, 1986), 248 pp.
Michael McClure, *Specks* (Talonbooks, 1985), 89 pp.
David Donnell, *The Blue Ontario Hemingway Boat Race* (Coach House, 1985), 118 pp.
Henri Guigonnat. *Daemon in Lithuania* (New Directions, 1985), 160 pp. Translaged by Barbara Wright.
Smaro Kamboureli, *in the second person* (Longspoon, 1985), 87 pp.
Lola Lemire Tostevin, *Double Standards* (Longspoon, 1985), unpaginated.
bill bissett, *canada gees mate for life* (Talonbooks, 1985), 128 pp.
Robert Duncan, *Fictive Certainties* (New Directions, 1985), 320 pp. Thirteen essays are collected, including "The Truth and Life of Myth."
Wilfred Watson, *Poems Collected / Unpublished / New* (Longspoon/ NeWest, 1986), 430 pp. Introduction by Thomas Peacocke. This major collection contains many new and unpublished poems as well as poems from Watson's earlier books, *Friday's Child* (1955), *The*

Sorrowful Canadians and Other Poems (1972), *I Begin with Counting* (1978), and *Mass on Cowback* (1982)

Fred Wah, *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (Turnstone, 1986), Winner of the 1986 Governer-General's Award for Poetry.

Michael McClure, *Selected Poems* (New Directions, 1986), 128 pp. The poems were chosen by McClure from all his earlier collections from *Hymns to St. Geryon and Other Poems* in 1959 to *Fragments of Perseus* in 1983.

Robert Hogg, *Heat Lightning* (Black Moss Press, 1986), 64 pp.

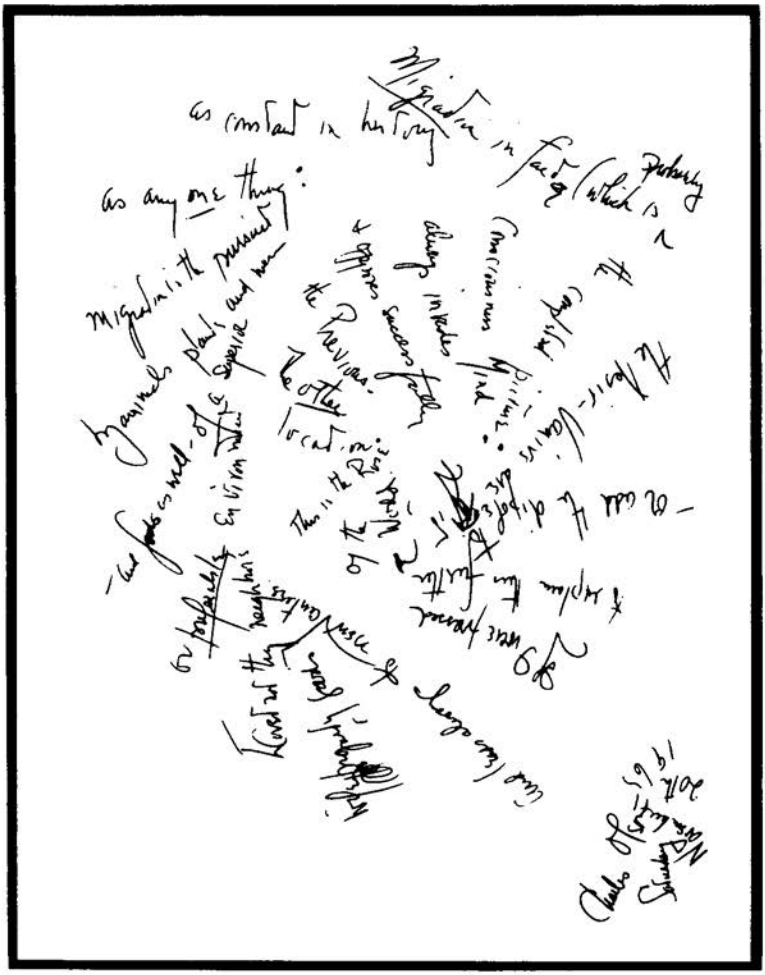
Robert Kroetsch, *Excerpts from the Real World* (Oolichan, 1986), 79 pp.

Robert Kroetsch, *Seed Catalogue* (Turnstone, 1986), 43 pp. A re-issue of the 1977 book with a new series of poems, "Spending the Morning on the Beach."

bpNichol, *Zygal: A Book of Mysteries and Translations* (Coach House, 1986), 128 pp. Waiting 12 years to appear the book has "finally burst forth, leaving a comet-tail of language spinning playfully in its wake."

Any reviewers out there?

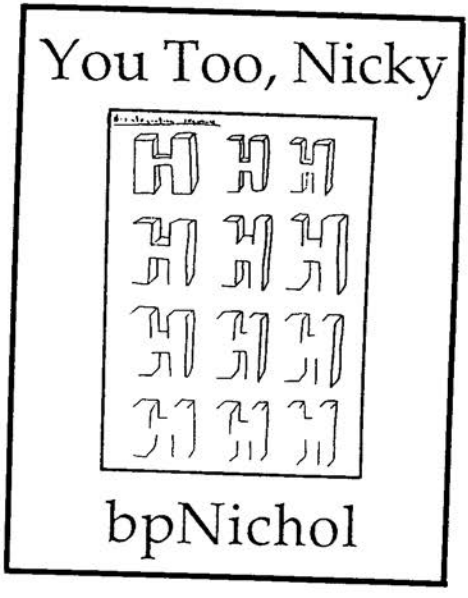
MANUSCRIPT POSTCARDS



Number 1: "The Rose of the World" by Charles Olson.
Number 2: "Notebook Sketch" by bpNichol.
Number 3: "Poem 73 of *Catullus*" by Louis Zukofsky.
Number 4: "Many Thanks" by Ezra Pound.
Number 5: "On the Mountain is a City of Foxes" by Michael McClure.

.25 each, minimum order $5.00 (20 postcards).
Send your cheque or money order payable to *Line*
with a note indicating the postcards requested.

Fissure Books



Fissure Books publishes single works of prose & poetry in editions of 200, 26 of which are lettered A-Z and signed by the author.

Series One:
bpNichol, *You Too, Nicky*
Miriam Nichols, *Common Pathologies*
Robin Blaser, *The Faerie Queene*
Peter Culley, *Natural History*

Series Subscription: $12.00 unsigned/$35.00 signed
Individual Copies: $4.00 unsigned/$10.00 signed

Fissure Books
Editor: Susan Lord
#3-2104 Venables Street
Vancouver, B.C. V5L 2J4

line

Numbers 7/8 Spring/Fall 1986

In this issue