

Steve Evans
Field Notes, June 2004—May 2005

The months that have passed since the first installment of “Field Notes” ran in *Poker 4* have been uncommonly cheerless ones, marked most deeply for many of us first by the narrow but devastating political defeat of November, which served to legitimate retroactively the U.S. war on Iraq along with many other elements of the Bush administration’s bizarre and audacious brand of theocratic war capitalism, and then by the catastrophic loss of life, human and otherwise, caused by the earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean at the turn of the year. The chaos and misery in an Iraq said after the January elections to be sovereign despite undiminished U.S. occupation, the continuing extra-legal detentions at Guantánamo, the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan, the widening AIDS epidemic, the gathering threat of an avian flu pandemic should the virus H5N1 mutate in the direction of human-to-human transmission, and the ever more overt and ominous signs that the environment has, after two centuries of unrelenting industrial expansion, been so severely disrupted, poisoned, and depleted that human existence in the near future seems increasingly implausible: such geopolitical facts, for the most part allowed to drift in a nether space disconnected from everyday life, are grimly determining nonetheless, just as working conditions in China underpin consumption habits in the U.S., whether or not any thought is given to child labor by obese shoppers in overlit aisles humming along to some of the worst music recorded in human history.

Then there are the losses, of a smaller-scale perhaps, but no less affecting, more particular to the intellectual and artistic sphere. First, in October, the philosopher Jacques Derrida died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 74. Then came news that the poet, performance artist, and anarchist Jackson Mac Low, born in Chicago on September 12, 1922, had succumbed on December 8 in New York City to complications following a stroke suffered in November. On March 7, 2005, the surrealist poet Philip Lamantia, born in 1927, died in his home town of San Francisco. And on March 30, 2005, Robert Creeley, born in Arlington, Massachusetts on May 21, 1926, died of pneumonia Odessa, Texas (where he had gone for a two-month residency at the Lannan Foundation in nearby Marfa). Each

man's name conjures not just a face, a tangible physiognomy, a no less particular body of books and other works, but also a tangle of magic words bristling still with the energies of their first introduction, words like aleatory, automatism, avant-garde, Beat, Black Mountain, breath, chance operation, company, deconstruction, *différance*, dream, desire, Fluxus, phallogocentrism, revolution, the surreal, trace, writing. Caught also in the tangle are the proper names of friends and collaborators whose deaths preceded these, and whose lives now become remoter still with the passing of the ones who remembered them in all their vivid and manifold immediacy.

Once, just a few seconds into a tape recording of Robert Duncan speaking, Creeley called for me to pause the machine: "that's not how Duncan sounded," he said. The only voice I ever had ever known to be Duncan's—the one on this tape and a few others—was pitched higher than it should be and the tempo was too fast. Whoever had handled the transfer from reel-to-reel to cassette, not knowing the voice first hand, had been unable to "true" the tape speed and make him sound as he actually should have. Creeley, that day, was present to "true" the event for those attending. With his loss, all like corrections are lost as well, and the loss multiplies with Mac Low, Lamantia, and Derrida, each of whom carry the first-hand memory of companions, mentors, rivals, and students away with them into oblivion.

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As it happens my last face-to-face encounters with both Jackson Mac Low and Robert Creeley took place almost exactly a year ago at the summer conference the National Poetry Foundation hosted in Orono on American and international poetics of the 1940s, where both were keynote readers. It was in admiration of Creeley's participation in that event—he was everywhere over those four days, speaking with everyone, and making one remarkable intervention after another in the public forums following lectures and panels, in his tribute to Zukofsky, and his spontaneous remarks on Carl Rakosi, whose death we learned of as a group on the conference's second day—that I slipped the sentence "Continuous time of Creeley's articulate presence of mind" into the "Thousand Blurred Words on the Times We Are With" just before *Poker* 4 went to press.

Another vivid memory that will long stay with me, as I suspect it will with others who witnessed it, is that of Jackson Mac Low's mid-morning

reading on June 24th, 2004. We did not know then that we were seeing the last of Mac Low's public performances (his widow Anne Tardos informed me of the fact after his death): we only knew that seated before us, wearing a dark-striped white shirt beneath a black blazer, his thick grey hair pushed up and back, his face full of expression under unruly eyebrows, was one of the defining figures of the contemporary avant-garde, a man of inexhaustible creativity, exacting in every aspect of his stunningly various practice, and now about to revisit in our company the first poems he had ever written, including the legendary poem from 1938 that opens his *Representative Works* (Roof, 1986), "HUNGER STRIKE whAt doeS lifemean." As the opening riff of that remarkable six-page sequence of sonic mutations escaped his lips, as the phonemes in the word "water" morphed under pressure of repetition into the phrase "Whater you thinking about," a look of utter concentration overspread Mac Low's taut face. His absorption in the process of making the minute decisions his score demanded of him was intense, and yet the grin on his face, and the wry punctuation offered by those eyebrows as he shifted tempo or scuttled from one sublexical sound cluster to another, exuded a contagious pleasure. By the time the phrase "God in his mercy is good" had blasphemously descended into a gurgled "Gog im fis merky ib goog," the audience was audibly delighted, and when Mac Low concluded with the words, "That was, I guess, my first poem," it exploded into spontaneous applause.

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In February and March of 2005, I immersed myself, not for the first time, in Creeley's vast and various body of work in order to write a long entry on its significance for a forthcoming encyclopedia of American poetry. When I submitted the entry, the space to the right of the dash following his birthdate remained open. I scarcely gave it any thought.

On March 30th, I was writing an e-mail to a person connected with the encyclopedia project, passing along tardily a contributor's note, when Rod Smith's call came carrying the news of Bob's death. Thus began a long day of many conversations and reminiscences, soon enough supplemented by remarks on websites and listserves. By his inexhaustible will to communicate, by his quenchless curiosity and generosity, by his talent for avoiding needless squabbles over poetic turf even while taking principled positions whenever the possibility was offered him (as with the *Best American Poetry* and his term as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets), Bob had made so many of us members of his oft-evoked

company that we all had something to say about him, to remember of him, to marvel at, and to thank him for. As the lines of connection made their melancholy pattern around his absented form, it was hard to stifle another sad thought: because no presently living poet binds so many of us to one another, poetry is likely to feel a narrower endeavor from this moment onward.

Months have gone by, and I still haven't filed the correction to my encyclopedia entry, the one that would confirm for the record that on March 30, 2005 the figure of outward departed from us definitively. As Jennifer Moxley said to me on the day it happened: "It feels like a layer of protection has been taken away." Protection and connection both.

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One unmistakable index of Creeley's charisma was the trace his habits of speech left in one's own idiom after spending even limited time with him. Having made certain words and phrases his own through repeated and distinctive usage—particular, old time, effectually, I hear, terrific, dear friend—he made them sound so curiously indispensable that it was hard to resist unconsciously adopting them.

But even more than the single words and pet phrases that made up his habitual repertoire, it was Creeley's syntax that was, in his everyday speech as in his poems and prose, so utterly distinctive, deliberate, and inimitable. After his death, I sat down to rewatch a videotape of an extraordinary reading Creeley gave in Maine in 2001, just two weeks after 9/11, and only a few days after his Lannan Lifetime Achievement award had been publicly announced. Having read from his own work the previous spring, Creeley decided on this night to voice just a few of his own poems in order that he might focus on certain of the poets—E.A. Robinson, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Robert Duncan, Louis Zukofsky—whose work had by his estimate permitted his own to occur. The poems he chose to read were, to a one, a delight to hear, and his singular voice made even those familiar to me sound new. But it was the syntax of the statements he made between poems, in the concentrated improvisatory bursts by which he tried to explain why he'd chosen, amidst so many possibilities, this poem and not that, that best brought him to my mind again.

Here then are three statements, or, as I now see them, brief self-portraits "in" syntax of the late Robert Creeley:

“When I had gone to that confusing war, I had taken what was then the active edition of Pound’s work that one could get, and it was a *Draft of XXX Cantos*, and I remember it included this one [XIII, the Kung Canto], and in the chaos and despair of that, it was interesting to think of this as a reality and measure.”

“I wanted to include Duncan because he was an absolute companion. Let me then read a section from the very beginning of the very first poem—well I loved ‘The Venice Poem,’ I thought it was an extraordinary piece of work—but the poem that moved me absolutely and all the way and forever was ‘A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar.’ For one thing, it not only made clear to me the dilemmas of knowing things, the dilemmas that consciousness, intelligence, create, but it took this classic story, the story of Cupid and Psyche, and so placed it, and so read it, that it became this extraordinary, wonderful, wonderful business.”

“I had in heart to read an extraordinary piece of Louis Zukofsky’s. Not specifically a poem, but the story he puts as first in the collection called *It Was*, and it’s that story published by Origin Press, which was Cid Corman’s press, in 1961. Cid had also published the first real edition of “A” 1-12. I make an emphasis upon this, this is 1959, because these undertakings that have become so decisive, not simply for poets but for the whole sense of our literature, were undertaken by people in such modest situations as Cid’s. This story was written in 1941, so it keeps to the pattern. It probably says as much about writing or senses of writing as I could possibly ever think to say.”

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I am too little familiar with Philip Lamantia’s work to offer any first-hand reflections on the significance of his passing. I did, however, have occasion recently to reread Andrew Joron’s essay “Neo-Surrealism; or, the Sun at Night” in the handsome new pamphlet edition brought out by Black Square Editions in 2004. Joron accords to Lamantia, uncontroversially I think, a privileged place in the history of surrealist writing in the U.S., emphasizing his proximity to Bréton (who hailed the teenaged Lamantia as “a voice that rises once in a hundred years”), and concisely presenting the several shifts in emphasis (if not core

commitments) that occurred in a career that stretched from the 1940s to the near-present. Unlike his counterparts in the Chicago Surrealist Group, especially Penelope and Franklin Rosemont, Lamantia was, according to Joron, averse to group formation and cultivated no organized following for his own work. He “was always too self-absorbed for such work,” Joron observes, “too attentive to his inner transformations: his self-described ‘mystical silences’ and experiments with hallucinogenic drugs give evidence of this” (11). Joron links this stance to Lamantia’s belief that “we can all the more happily trace our inspirations from Lautréamont and Rimbaud to Breton and Péret and Roussel to [Haitian poet] Magloire-Saint-Aude, exemplary signposts for further transgressions, without literally re-tracing in one’s own poetic praxis their inimitable movements” (9).

Joron’s own stance on the neo-surrealism that he seeks simultaneously to chronicle and to celebrate similarly blends respect for—and deep knowledge of—preceding practices with a desire to see something new emerge. In a passage like the following, seismological metaphors are joined to concepts borrowed from Ernst Bloch’s philosophy in a proclamation of permanent surrealist revolution:

...surrealism is not exempt from its own imperative, synthesized from Marx and Rimbaud, to “transform the world” and to “change life.” Even in its earliest years, while unified under the leadership of Breton, the movement underwent successive mutations in response to internal and external conditions. The self-identity of the movement therefore cannot be situated within timeless tenets, but only in *the shock-pattern of the wave-front of surrealization as it passes, under the impetus of practices not to be prescribed in advance, through a particular time and place*. This expanding wave-front has no permanently fixed form or content. Surreality is not a stand of standing “over” reality; rather, it is the boiling-over of that reality, a phase-change that always departs from a highly specific set of initial conditions. “Neo-surrealism” is a term that refuses termination—one that awaits the emergence of the *novum* within surrealism itself. (9)

I will not pursue the topic at length here, but at a moment when surrealism circulates throughout the poetic field as a readily available style, adopted at low cost and productive of little more than the occasional excuse to say that life is weird, it might be interesting to hold in mind Joron’s more

emphatic concept of an explosive surreality that emerges along the fault lines of contemporary existence's structuring contradictions.

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Somewhere among Paul Blackburn's papers there is a typewritten letter addressed by the poet to a jukebox company representative whom he hoped to sell on the idea of putting recorded poems alongside the musical selections available on the company's machines. I don't recall there being a reply from the company to what must have seemed to them an odd request indeed, but it is clear that with the occasional exception (such as poet-curated radio shows at public and community stations, like the one Blackburn himself hosted at WBAI) poetry has not become the audible fact of everyday life—heard in bars and malls and cars and workplaces—that Blackburn thought it deserved to be.

While unlikely to reverse that situation at a stroke, the PENNsound website launched by Al Filreis, Charles Bernstein, and managing director Chris Mustazza in January does represent a serious advance in the web-archiving of poetry sound files, one that promises—in the age of the iPod and similar devices—to gain for poetry a whole new hearing.

One of the most promising aspects of PENNsound is the intelligent use its designers have made of lessons learned from such pioneering sites as Laurable's Poetry Audio Links, UbuWeb's sound poetry and mp3 libraries, and the Factory School's Digital Audio Archive. In the six-point manifesto he drafted for the site not long after his arrival at UPenn in 2003, Charles Bernstein deliberately and wisely steers away from two problems often encountered in earlier efforts, namely the reliance on proprietary streaming software (like Real Player) and the tendency to present full-length readings by a given poet on a given date, with little additional information provided about the specific poems read and no indication of the works' provenance beyond cues found in the file's content itself.

Bernstein's half-dozen imperatives tackle these and other problems head on: according to him, soundfiles must be free and downloadable, they must be of mp3 quality or better, they must be "singles," they must be named clearly and consistently, they must come with embedded bibliographical information, and they must be indexed for maximal ease of retrievability. The last feature is still in development, and other imperatives are inconsistently implemented in the actual site, but the manifesto does helpfully articulate principles that other sites might also

adopt as more and more audiofiles migrate into—or find themselves originating indigenously within—digital formats.

The major advance, to my mind, comes with the insistence upon “singles”—discrete works that can be accessed directly, easily downloaded, and stored on portable players like the iPod. Bernstein explains:

At present, the vast majority of poetry recordings are for entire readings, typically thirty or more minutes, with no tracking of individual cuts or poems. While these full readings have great literary and archival value taken as a whole, few but the most devoted listen to full recordings of readings or, if they do, fewer still listen more than once. The more useful format is to break readings up into individual poems and to make MP3s of each poem available. MP3s of song-length poems could become a very appealing format for poetry. The implications for audience, listenership, critical thinking, poetics, and poetic production are great.

In practice, what this insistence upon discrete poems facilitates is a mix-tape mentality attentive to the pleasures of the segue, whether synthetic or disjunctive, and to the variations to be heard in different voicings of the same poem across time. A reader of *Poker* 4, intrigued by Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s “Draft 63: Dialogue of self and soul,” could download the 6 minute and 49 second sound file of the poem from the “Studio 111/ Close Listening” page of PENNSound. Said reader could then continue on with others of DuPlessis’s “Drafts,” or switch to the “Featured Authors” page and download a Juliana Spahr poem. From there, a click to the “Singles” page brings the possibility of adding Duncan’s “Often I Am Permitted” to the mix. And so on....

One of the pleasures of the next few years will be the expansion of PENNSound’s holdings beyond its initial stock of langpo- and Philly-centric materials, and the increased experimentation with sound—as a unit of composition, comprehension, and recombination—that it is certain to encourage. Paul Blackburn’s dream—one shared by his friend, the internet download fiend Bob Creeley—is at last coming true.

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I'm grateful to the poets Nathaniel Tarn and Kent Johnson for taking the trouble to respond to statements I made in the first batch of "Field Notes." Their comments, printed in *Poker* 5, zero in very helpfully on a few of the places (far more exist than generous readers were willing to point out) where my claims suffer from imprecise formulation, ambiguity, or, worse, a flat-out failure to conform to the facts as we know them. Tarn speaks with extraordinary authority when it comes to issues of literary "economy," for he is a poet who has negotiated that treacherous terrain for forty years now and has, with many collaborators, made it yield more than thirty-five volumes of poetry, essays, and translations. He also has to his credit the astonishing run of books published by Cape Editions under his general editorship, the scale and shape of which series—short, carefully selected books representing many genres and translated into English from many languages—exemplifies the wise use of a burgeoning printscape's demands on readerly attention.

Because not all readers of the present issue of the *Poker* will have number four readily to hand, let me cite the particular passage with which Tarn mostly concerns himself in his reply. It reads: "I find with time, and not without a great deal of ambivalence and self-doubt concerning the development, [that] I have moved as a reader, and am trying to learn how to move as a 'critic' ... from an emphatic model of value—in which good work is by definition scarce, concentrated in just a few texts, and of an order discontinuous with ordinary existence—to a model that delinks value from scarcity and links it, instead, to a concept of distributed productive plenty that defies or sets aside zero-sum logics and envisions good work as, potentially at least, common in its occurrence and continuous with the plane of this-worldly experiences" (68).

Tarn finds this and related claims to be idiosyncratic at best, and at worst to fly in the face of facts established by generations of literary experience. If I read the second paragraph of his reply correctly, Tarn's concerns escalate on the following pattern. First, he worries that to sustain an interest in "distributive productive plenty," it would be necessary to *do* nothing else but read, and to *read* nothing else but newly published books. Second, even if such a bizarre stance, print drunk and moronically presentist, were to be adopted by some unfortunate soul (note that such a person would be prevented by definition from reading the work most needful to him: Pope's *The Dunciad*) it would not age well, since "it is almost impossible, past a certain point in life, to go on reading every younger poet who crops up as opposed to poets of one's own generation that one is committed to follow." Third, and finally, might not the

emphasis on how a single life gets conducted—whether an individual’s time has been wisely husbanded or foolishly squandered—prevent us from posing a more pressing (and to individual writers no doubt *depressing*) question, namely “how many poets survive in the collective memory per generation?”

Having articulated three excellent reasons to be skeptical of the paradigm of “distributed productive plenty”—and therefore also the “banalization of the good” that I somewhat illicitly yoked to the concept—Tarn goes on to offer two suggestions meant to “lower the pressure” that has been building along the seam where finite human attention collides with teeming poetic information. His proposal that print-on-demand technologies be used to extend the active life of a given book makes excellent sense to me, even though it would add to rather than reduce the range of options available to already overwhelmed readers and writers. As things stand now, it is often the case that by the time a poet’s third book is published, his or her first book is out of print and unavailable—and the problem only worsens, with a handful of exceptions, as active writers enter the long middle period after their first recognition and before the work is (if it ever is) collected up and “canonized.” In combination with intelligent strategies of web-archiving, print-on-demand projects like the one presently being executed with vigor and elegance by Salt Publishing may succeed displacing the old sad rhythm of printing, remaindering, and pulping that put books too quickly out of circulation.

Tarn’s second suggestion points toward a more effective and responsible participation in the economy of poetry through more concerted consumption: he would like to see “every poet and every student of poetry in writing classes ... commit themselves to buying between, say, six and a dozen poetry books a year.” Leaving aside the large captive audience potentially included in the designation “every student of poetry in writing classes,” the complicating factor I foresee here is the gift economy particular to small-press poetry, which showers productive members of the “community” (perhaps network would be the more neutral and accurate word here) with books, chapbooks, magazines, and so forth, equivalent to, and often far in excess of, the value of their original contribution. Could more cash be directed into poetry consumption even by participants in the gift economy? It’s likely, and if the five thousand people actively interested in contemporary poetry at any given moment in the U.S. put an additional \$200 a year into consuming it, the result would quickly approach an additional million dollars spread throughout the system. Even so, it is doubtful to me that “the overall situation of

poetry would be completely changed” by such an increase in consumption, for it would still be insufficient to reverse the longstanding fact that poetry seldom realizes profits within straight-up free enterprise.

I share Tarn’s suspicion that the “general reader” is a phantasmatic figure—at best a democratizing dream, at worst an alibi for repeated acts of censorship—and I also share Frank O’Hara’s allergic reaction to schemes for foisting poetry upon persons who get along without it very well; to my ears, even Williams sounds overbearing and self-aggrandizing when he claims that people die for lack of the news poetry might bring them. Once the do-gooder notion of improving others, whether from the MFA left or from MBA right (Ted Kooser, Dana Gioia, John Barr and the Poetry Foundation) are set aside, there is only the modest company, as Creeley so influentially christened it, of those who share an elected affinity—coaxed, perhaps, but not coerced—with the things language can be made to do and say within poetry’s unpredictable ambit.

I come back to my claim that discussions of poetic value go best when preceded by a declaration of just how much poetry the involved parties desire. I framed some foreseeable responses in *Poker* 4 and offer them in a slightly revised form here: “One good new book a century? A generation? A career? A decade? An Olympics? A year? A season? A month? A week? Each morning?” It sounds to me that Tarn would, in his severest moments of historically-informed realism, go with a very low number at the level of the generation, even though his exhortation to enlightened consumerism seeks to motivate readers to be more active in their everyday lives and to check out a new work every month or so. While the hypothesis of future generations, and hence of future makers of judgments about the important poetry of the present time, is perhaps harder for me to sustain for political and environmental reasons (I reluctantly count myself among the dismal cohort Fredric Jameson described as finding it easier to believe in the end of the world than the end of capitalism), my sense is otherwise not far at all from Tarn’s and it is based not on the prescriptive grounds of any readerly categorical imperative, but on descriptive ones; that is, not on what people *should* do, but what many already *do* as a matter of course.

The people I most enjoy talking poetry with live reasonably various and industrious lives and still manage to find time to read two or three new books of poetry a week. At such a pace, surprises and new finds are not all that common, but when they occur, they do so against a background of deep and detailed knowledge about what is happening in the field,

including a sense of its momentary mannerisms and trendy tics, its foolish enthusiasms, its one-sidedness when compared to the other periods and to the tradition as the reader possesses it, to its bullshit, in other words, but also its relative strengths, recent accomplishments, and still-to-be-tapped resources. (All these are things the so-called “regular” reader, approaching a poem from some privileged point of blessed naïveté, beloved of arts bureaucrats and audience builders, can by definition never know, which is why it is folly to place too much stock in such a reader’s judgments.) Some of this knowledge makes it into print, but much of it never does, or does so only in a form stripped of the candor that initially enlivened it in conversation. Indeed, if a poetry criticism of any import were to reemerge after what is commonly-agreed to be a very long hiatus—and such a criticism could serve a useful function in the defense against the delegated judgment machine that is the current prize structure—it would have to connect to this repository of finely-grained informal judgments and discover a rhetoric for bringing its formidable resources to bear in the more formally structured venues where struggles over value take place most consequentially.

Though the segue is admittedly rather forced, let me use the opening provided by this digression on the vexed question of criticism to attempt a response to Kent Johnson’s accusation that I fail to understand properly the nature and function of the “heteronym” in modern poetry, and, worse still, that I take the identitarian maintenance of “a reified and facile ideological form”—the name of the author—to be “a primary and urgent poetic imperative.” Before defending my earlier remarks from these two charges, let me say that I agree with Johnson on a key point, namely that heteronyms *can* discharge every bit as well as regular author names the synecdochic function of crystallizing past experiences of poetic value and allowing the projection on that basis of future experiences (to paraphrase my original claim). But the answer to the question “can they do so?” does not automatically dictate the same answer to the question “have they done so?”—and here, I suspect, is where Johnson and I diverge in our opinions. For while I would welcome evidence to the contrary, and though I take no pleasure whatever in saying so, I simply haven’t seen the actual works—poems, books, sustained projects—that bear out Johnson’s claim that “as vehicles of poetic production *and* as tools for confounding mechanisms of institutional entrapment, heteronyms will enact very different kinds of ‘experiences’ than the I.D. card designations that blithely tag almost all poetry today.”

Heteronymy is definitely hip in certain sectors of the music world. Though an outsider at my age, I encounter it most frequently when reading the excellent London-based magazine *The Wire*, where many a thumbnail review is devoted to establishing the exact network of relationships obtaining between a small swarm of heteronymically conducted projects and side-projects by individuals like Scott Herren (“Prefuse 73, unlike Brazil 66, is the work of a lone gun, a super-sharpshooter with an army of aliases who mostly answers to the name Scott Herren”) and Kieran Hebden (who records under several names, including “Four Tet”). But in contemporary poetic practice, which I pay far more attention to, it is hard to call to mind the interesting experiments in heteronymy that Johnson implies are out there. Indeed, it is telling that the sole example he does adduce is the tried and true one of Fernando Pessoa, a brilliantly inventive writer, without whom this discussion of heteronymy obviously wouldn’t even be taking place, but not a poet who any longer occupies the neglected position that Johnson complains of in his statement: “Little wonder a poet like Pessoa is hardly ever mentioned by our ‘post-avant’ critics.” (Let it be said that if Johnson genuinely wants to contest “entrapping” identities, he might consider relinquishing the literally preposterous adjective preceding the word “critics” in this sentence: the term is a pretty piece of reification that paralyzes the thinking of those who consent to it.) But to return to the crucial distinction here: that a heteronym *might* operate within—and, perhaps, against—the logic of normative identity in the literary market is not at issue. The question is *are they actually doing so?*

One problem in formulating an answer here is the fact that an artfully employed heteronym could operate “undetected” for quite some time, but while that is abstractly the case, the small, closely interconnected nature of the poetry field actually works fairly strongly against it. It only took a year for the Foetry website originator Alan Cordle to be outed. And the initially anonymous Anti-Hegemony Project made its peace with the author function when my UMaine colleague Benjamin Friedlander included that series of satirical pastiches in his book *Simulcast*. Indeed, the few heteronymic projects that I’m aware of actually take their cue from *The Wire*’s music journalists and from Johnson himself in his reference to Pessoa’s heteronyms—that is, they tend to treat the heteronymic terms as satellites orbiting a normatively-named artist or author, effectively leaving intact, if not actually intensifying, the logic of reification that they purport to challenge.

Like Andrew Joron's emphatic concept of politicized "surreality," mentioned above, Johnson's concept of disruptive heteronymity seems to point in a promising direction for poetic exploration. Whether that concept actually gets realized in works that transcend the limits of resentment-fueled pranksterism cannot be predicted in advance. I look forward to seeing how the phenomenon unfolds.

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There is no equivalent in U.S. letters to the Marseille-based review journal *Cahier Critique de Poésie*, now on its eighth issue. A fat bi-annual published by Farrago and edited by Éric Giraud along with a five-member "comité de rédaction" that includes Jean Daive and Marie-Laure Picot, the *CCP* attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of poetry publications and events in France. Issue eight begins with a sixty-plus page dossier on Jacques Roubaud that includes an interview, essays and notes, and an extraordinary new batch of epigrams and remarks on everything from Duchamp to prosody to Situationism ("an involuntary pataphysics") from Roubaud's own pen. There follow about 125 pages of book reviews, twenty pages devoted to anthologies and other collectively authored works, fifteen pages on recent issues of specific literary journals, and a concluding thirty pages or so of miscellaneous media, including art catalogs, CDs, DVDs, digital poetry, music, not to mention an annotated stroll through the bookshops of Strasbourg. Supplied with an index listing the poets and journals "recensés" as well as the ninety-three contributors, the pages of *CCP* are easy to navigate: as in a bookstore, one can drift, browse, and category jump, or one can make a bee-line to a particular title, size it up, and depart. And as with a bookstore, the volume repays return visits.

I had formed an impression, while perusing earlier issues of the *Cahier*, that the reviewing—in addition to being of necessity quite condensed (single volume reviews rarely extend beyond a single page)—tended to be weighted toward the descriptive and the appreciative, with negative judgments admitted only reluctantly. The present issue does not alter that impression much, though it may be that as an outsider to French critical discourse, I am deaf to tonalities that would be easily recognized by any initiate. For while the case "for" is often made explicitly, the case "against" is left to be inferred from inconspicuously-placed adjectives and a certain abstention from praise rather than the presence of pointed criticism. In a project that proposes so comprehensive a scope, such concessions to the goodwill of the community it purports to chronicle—

but also must draw from for contributions—are inevitable and on the whole harmless.

A passage from Georges Bataille, printed on the back jacket of the inaugural issue printed in March of 2001, lays out the argument nicely. It might appear at first that good criticism functions like a guillotine, Bataille writes, not least in its ability to draw blood. But with time and experience, the grim analogy yields to an insight less extravagantly riven with Terror for all involved. Once one has resolved not to kill those one doesn't like, nor elevate to the heavens those one does, "nothing remains," Bataille declares, "except a certain modesty." Such is the stance of *Cahier Critique de Poésie*, and it has so far generated eight issues overflowing with invaluable information about the state of poetry in France.

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In *Poker* 4, I made reference in passing to "the edifying and stupefying blogs." While I still find it impossible to recommend poetry blogs to people presently getting along without them very well—there is simply too much wasted time involved—I do myself draw almost daily on the sense of things proposed in that loosely cross-linked network of signals.

Ron Silliman's is the best known and most visited of the poetry blogs and it may thus stand for some as a test case as to whether the genre as a whole is worth bothering with. But Silliman's tendency to deliver his judgments in ponderously hyperbolic terms, his stubborn Manicheanism when faced with a complex poetic field, his fetish for quantification, and his teacherly—and often outright pedantic—tone, makes his site in fact quite atypical of the genre, and perhaps indeed most suitable for neophytes, since anyone with a more extensive knowledge of contemporary poetry is apt to be annoyed by the lack of subtlety that substitutes for "authoritativeness" in so many of his posts. It does of course remain possible to read Silliman against the grain of his own proclivities and to come away with valuable insights into modernism, the New American Poetry, and language-centered writing very broadly defined.

Silliman updates his blog every weekday morning. Even more industrious, though working at the scale of the squib rather than the sustained scree, Jordan Davis updates his "Equanimity" site throughout the daylight hours of most weekdays and some weekends. On his site one encounters snippets from the world of finance, pointers to other blogs, episodes from

the author's ongoing struggle to maintain the mood for which the site is named, glimpses of the New York poetry scene, hommages to mentor Kenneth Koch, stray thoughts on fatherhood, and a fair amount of discourse on pop music. If Silliman stares down his topics, Davis darts glances at his, then redirects his eyes.

The five blogs from which I consistently learn the most about poetry and its enviroing practices are tended by Joshua Corey (Cahiers de Corey), Franklin Bruno (Konvolut M), John Latta (Hotel Point), Gary Sullivan (Elsewhere) and Kasey Silem Mohammad (Lime Tree). Each brings a distinctive style and range of reference into play. Bruno, based in Los Angeles (though on his way to Chicago at summer's end), is excellent on philosophy, film, and music as well as poetry. Corey brings a doctoral student's habits of wide reading and careful conceptualization to bear in a blog he composes in the margins of his dissertation work at Cornell: earnest and self-questioning, he's an ideal interlocutor. Like Corey, Mohammad is good at conceptual work, at framing provocative questions, and resisting the received ideas of the moment: his position-takings are shot through with a pataphysical wit not often encountered in other blogs of comparable seriousness. Sullivan's aim is to elude the provincialism of poetry scenes—and of cultural life in the U.S. more generally—by training his attention “elsewhere”: Bollywood film, comic book art (and the subculture that supports it), Japanese literature, and other aspects of global culture fall within his purview, and these unfamiliar points of reference throw his remarks on poetry into an interesting relief. Latta's critical idiom is studded with archaisms and lexical eccentricities, but behind the Stevensian delight in high rhetoric there is a mind that is surpassingly quick to the mark: often the first critical commentary I see on a newly published book comes in the form of observations and remarks Latta has posted to Hotel Point before turning to his day's work at the University of Michigan library.

As this list of seven male names makes obvious, the poetry blogs, like their predecessor the Buffalo Poetics List, have rather predictable gender troubles. Ange Mlinko's newish Bachelardette, Lisa Jarnot's quirkily self-advertising Lisablog, and Nada Gordon's often interesting Ululations go a good way toward remedying the imbalance (Stephanie Young's *The Well-Nourished Moon*, an early favorite of mine, is less often updated these days), but as a discursive space, the blogs lag behind the more gender-neutralized field at large.

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Both Mark Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down* (Coach House, 2004) and Rodrigo Toscano's *To Leveling Swerve* (Krupskaya, 2004) aggressively foreground class-based conflicts in social life. Nowak builds his long documentary sequences chronicling the experiences of mill workers, miners, service workers, and other laborers through collage techniques, but his is a Reznikoffian collage, far less hectically disjunctive than Toscano's, and far more neutral in tone and patient in attitude. Alternating typefaces—roman, bold, and italic—are used to indicate shifts in source material: a news report, a first person account, a grammar book, and so forth. And three of the five sequences make structural use of photographs, Nowak's own in "June 19, 1982" and "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher (referred to but not reproduced) in the opening poem "\$00 / Line / Steel / Train." But the cuts between sources and cross-media work is seldom disorienting: one has the sense that Nowak would prefer his reader to be located, to know what he or she is looking at, as a first step in coming to grips with a situation that desperately needs changing. Along with Reznikoff's *Testimony*, one thinks also of Muriel Rukeyser's powerful 1938 book, *U.S. 1*, especially its opening sequence, "The Book of the Dead."

Toscano's work, by contrast, is mostly about momentum, about thinking fast and talking back. There's a cockiness to the voice in his poems that one does not hear in Nowak's, a tone at once funny, cynical, and combative, borrowed perhaps from the more politically-resistant forms of rap, that makes it sound as though victory were in reach even when a sober assessment would argue the opposite conclusion. Nowak's poems provide that soberer assessment: they document political and economic defeat. As in *Testimony*, all prefigurations of change for the better are rigorously framed out of the manifest text (the reader's conscience either supplies them or it does not: the poet does not appear to impose conclusions).

Toscano's energies in *To Leveling Swerve* run to neologism, to compounded noun phrases yoking dissimilar terms, to darting references that only subcode initiates can follow, to the hectic accumulation of lines through which thread a handful of repeated elements, just enough to check the centrifugal drive toward textual chaos. There's a penchant for saying things twice, for holding, tweaking, and blurring phonemes, for all varieties of patter, slang, jargon, and cant. (Oddly enough, there's also a fair amount of schoolboy Latin).

Neither *Shut Up Shut Down* nor *To Leveling Swerve* entirely achieves the elusive synthesis of political acuity and artistic integrity that each aims at in its different way. Nowak's book is often too flat, and Toscano's too flashy. But what they attempt, and in part accomplish, is serious and admirable: to build political struggle into the deep structure of their texts, to radicalize the consciousness of their readers, to take up the defining fact of class—local and global—and make it say something we never would have guessed otherwise.

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"I would prefer to avoid crescendo in these cacophonous times / inundated with mess," states the speaker of "The Scale of Largesse," one of the many meticulously built and brilliantly absorbing poems in Beth Anderson's second volume *Overboard* (Burning Deck, 2004). The gesture of declining the grand gesture in favor of microtonal variation and complex formal architecture is familiar from Anderson's admirable debut, *The Habitable World* (Instance, 2001), but with *Overboard* the poet moves beyond her antecedents in Stevens, Barbara Guest, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge to achieve the precarious and exhilarating balance that Louis Zukofsky christened the "rested totality" of "objectification." Each of the book's five sequences features an expansive line (twenty syllables or more) that would collapse into prose in lesser hands; in Anderson's the pleasures of enjambment, caesura, and carefully measured rhythmical figures persist along with the intricate scissoring of syntax and sonic unit we're accustomed to appreciate in more restricted line-lengths. Highlights include the nine "Hearsay Sonnets," which plumb the Proustian allure of the place-name and capture perfectly the contradictions (the quotidian versus the exotic; the actual versus the imaginary) condensed therein: "I tried to twist it around / and it tried to do to me what I had done to it. So we kept moving / and twisting and formed an inheritance, visible on the map / when we managed at last to hold it upright. Clarity / Made everything around it better." Also excellent is the ten-poem sequence "A Locked Room," where the locked-room subgenre of mystery writing becomes a figure for the murderous side of social determination as such. But most impressive is the concluding sequence "Hazard," which is Mallarméan in theme ("dice will roll") and fascinating formally (the internal structure of the 400-line poem and all its strictly patterned subdivisions would require an article to fully explain). Not every reader will find the "scale of largesse" at which an Anderson poem unfolds congenial or comprehensible. For the patient and attentive reader, however, it doesn't get much better than this.

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Playing Bodies unites painter Francie Shaw and poet Bob Perelman (already united in matrimony for several decades) in a startlingly brilliant and unpredictable collaboration. Commencing with three small figures (“two bendable people and a plastic dinosaur”), Shaw made fifty-two paintings, all in shades of inky blue against white backgrounds, that set forth an elemental choreography of intimacy that is by turns humorous and ominous, a sequence of freeze frames showing gender-gripped (and therefore puppet-like) humans as they wrestle—and sometimes dance—with what signifies otherness for them (the “not-my-gender,” the “not-my-species”). Shaw’s images run a gamut from goofy to kinky, and Perelman’s poems match to them short bursts of utterance that seem sometimes to emanate from within the frame and other times to caption or comment upon the action from outside. “I toy with you,” begins the twenty-fifth poem—as the dark-clad, curiously sack-shaped, “male” figure stands with a foot authoritatively placed upon the ribs of the dinosaur splayed on the ground beneath him—“like I toy with my dick / I take it / and throw it // far away but find myself / somewhere strange, all the more / attached, a faithful acolyte worshipping / at your shrine, don’t tell me / where, I want to guess.”

The *fort-da* game here played with the phallus (and/or its humbler double, the prick) condenses the book’s most insistent dynamic, which is a vertiginous slippage into and out of mastery, a phasing in and out of servitude. In the thirty-second poem, the command to “astonish me” is taken into the psychic economy of the one so ordered (the white clad “female” figure, if I read the relation to the painting correctly), where it gets reworked, ultimately reemerging as a declaration of triumph on “her” part:

When you said
“Astonish me”
I didn’t know what to do
but I did think I knew
what you meant

But you just wanted to see
me jump
so you
could smell inside

Well I guess it's the same
old unmentionable
Pretty astonishing I bet

I think I'll ride around on you
and we'll see how astonishing that is

Early in Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*, the beleaguered poet—beloved by the public and therefore scorned by the patrons at the Café des Poetes—asks what he might do to regain the respect of his peers: “Astonish us,” he is told. In *A Textbook of Poetry*, Jack Spicer placed the same imperative—“étonnez moi”—in the mouth of “the Word” itself. Perelman's poem translates this insistent poetic *demand*, one designed to trouble even geniuses, into an erotic one. That is to say, he transposes the poet/reader dyad onto the sexual dyad of lover/beloved, returning the questions of who rides, and who writes, to its messiest, most motile, and least predictable form.

Characteristically, Granary Books has done an excellent job of producing the book as physical object, with Shaw's images occupying verso pages and Perelman's poems, set in a deep purplish ink that blends with shades employed in the images, on the recto, and Susan Stewart contributes a brief but thoughtful preface. It is also worth seeing Perelman perform the poems if the opportunity presents itself: I have not heard them read in a gallery setting, with the paintings actually present (which must be the ideal way to experience the work), but I have twice seen portions of the series performed by Perelman against slides of the images and both times I found the interplay of words and pictures to be even subtler and stranger than it appears in book form.

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Also read and recommended

Books

Aversions by Devin Johnston (Omnidawn, 2004).
Company of Moths by Michael Palmer (New Directions, 2005).
Indigo Bunting by Bernadette Mayer (Zasterle, 2004).
Lake Systems by Cynthia Sillers (Tougher Disguises, 2004).
Macular Hole by Catherine Wagner (Fence, 2004).

My first painting will be "The Accuser" by Philip Jenks (Zephyr, 2005).
Notebooks 1956-1978 by Danielle Collobert, trans. Norma Cole (Litmus, 2003).
Recollections of Being by Nathaniel Tarn (Salt, 2004).
Self-Destruction by Laura Moriarty (Post-Apollo, 2004).
The Blaze of the Poui (U of Georgia, 2003).
The Frequencies by Noah Eli Gordon (Tougher Disguises, 2003).
The Joyous Age by Christopher Nealon (Black Square, 2004).
The Lichtenberg Figures by Ben Lerner (Copper Canyon, 2004).
Snows Gone By: New & Uncollected Poems, 1964-2002 by James Koller (La Alameda, 2004).
The Real Subject: Queries and Conjectures of Jacob Delafon with Sample Poems by Keith Waldrop (Omnidawn, 2004).
The Thorn by David Larsen (Faux, 2005).
This Connection of Everyone with Lungs by Juliana Spahr (U of California, 2005).
To Be Sung by Michael Kelleher (BlazeVox, 2005).

Chapbooks

Knowledge Follows by David Perry (Insurance, 2003).
Lola by Lyn Hejinian (Belladonna, 2005).
Meteoric Flowers by Elizabeth Willis (Atticus/Finch, 2004).
My Vote Counts by Dale Smith (Effing, 2004).
Pasolini Poems by Stacy Szymaszek (Cy Press, 2005).
Rousseau's Boat by Lisa Robertson (Nomados, 2004).

In-House Operations

Though living in close proximity to a poet neither automatically equips one to read that poet's work well nor categorically disqualifies one from doing so, it is fair to say that my own history is too entangled with Jennifer Moxley's *Often Capital* (Flood, 2005) to afford me clear insight into the value that collection of her earliest works might hold for others. It would, for similar reasons, go against protocol for me to offer an assessment of *Some Mountains Removed* (Subpress, 2004) in pages directly overseen by its author, and my editor and friend, Daniel Bouchard. It isn't as a critic, then, that I register and celebrate the arrival of these two volumes into the world. I do so rather as a familiar of these poets without whom I would find life, including the life of poetry, less fascinating than they with their words make it.

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Notes & Acknowledgements

More information about the *Cahier Critique de Poésie*, including ordering information, can be found at the website www.cipmarseille.com. • Other websites and blogs mentioned in “Field Notes” can be quickly found using Google searches; it is also possible to reach them via the links page at www.thirdfactory.net. • My review of Beth Anderson’s *Overboard* was initially written for a trade journal which ran it in much shortened and altered form.