

# OPEN LETTER

## Long-liners Conference Issue

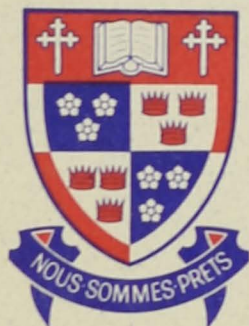
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The Proceedings of the Long-liners  
Conference on the Canadian Long Poem  
York University, Toronto, May 29-June 1, 1984  
edited by Frank Davey and Ann Munton

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## Making Strange Poetics

Fred Wah

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IN BOOK V OF bpNICHOL'S LONG POEM *The Martyrology* THE READER IS GIVEN the choice of reading the poem sequentially as it's laid out or of following alternate reading routes suggested by the author through numbered references. Book V also opens with a quote from Jean Cocteau ('The greatest literary masterpiece is no more than an alphabet in disorder.') and a letter from 'Matt' which includes the statement 'I had a sudden image of your poetry capturing you like the Minotaur in the labyrinth ...' It is also indicated that Book V is a 'gordian knot ... (which) is also an untying of the first four books.' This is all a sub-text, a side-text, an aside to a main text which is and has been one of the prime contemporary documents to a notion in art called 'making strange.'

### *Ostranenie*

The idea is an old one but it has become currency recently via an oft-quoted 1917 statement by the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.<sup>1</sup>

This technique of 'making strange' is partially and variously called defamiliarization, deconstruction, displacement, negative capability, or non-narrative, not knowing, indeterminacy, silence, distortion, parataxis, non-referentiality, dictation, ambiguity, disfunctioning, fragmentation, undecidability, Differenzqualitat, departure, derivation, opposition, divergence, alter-native, and on and on.

For myself, I recognized this 'poetic' first as a heady feeling of release and

freedom through Rilke's cries on the cliffs at Duino, Creeley's attack on inherited line structures, Olson's break from the rigid left margin out onto the page, and through my own early years of derivation from these and other bards. I was relieved of some educationally-instilled guilt and confusion when I read in Fenellosa that the sentence needn't be a 'complete thought.' Robert Duncan's affirmations of aperiodic, non-causal structures kept me intrigued by new and unsuspected possibilities in poetic language. The spine of my copy of Keats' *Selected Letters* is broken open to that letter to his brothers in which he describes the capability 'of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason ...'<sup>12</sup> or perhaps it was during the faltering and strained explorations of one of my first jazz *ad libs* playing trumpet for the Kampus Kings in 1956. Certainly the jazz model of a freely-moving line playing off of and against the bound chord progressions showed me the delight of distortion and surprise.

Prevention of the feeling out by previous sets 'I' gets  
 enclosed again except by stealth to find the point where  
 Harrison says dromenon pre-tells the story story being  
 dangerously easy to repeat (all the time) but 'L' or 'P'  
 like Nicole in her book or even the bible are new once just  
 about accidental why stumbling is not taught in the court  
 everyone else believes in animals too to fake it writing  
 just like at Shao Lin the drunk dance

*ostranenie* via K., K., and Shklovsky making strange eyes  
 half closed negative capability defamiliar estranged and  
 abstract cover trade nothing for another otherwise imposed  
 logic but watch it if you think there is an edge until  
 swimming like climbing maybe the drunkenness of a foreign  
 dance or sentence saying this

This piece is from 'Notation' for *Open Letter*<sup>3</sup> and there I called it 'drunken' writing after the notion of using seemingly drunk and unpredictable movements in tai chi and other martial arts in order to upset the opponent's expectations.

### *The Long Poem*

Robert Kroetsch views the impulse toward the long poem as a resistance to end<sup>4</sup> and Frank Davey sees it as a desire to continue.<sup>5</sup> Earlier in this conference bpNichol noted

the trouble with conclusions is that they conclude. ideas  
 have side-effects too. you have to keep an idea open as



long as possible in order to get a feeling for, a notion of,  
all its possible side effects. the history of ideas teaches  
us that one life-time isn't a long enough testing period for any idea.<sup>6</sup>

These impulses are part of the same stance, that of estrangement. And, as Kroetsch notes in 'For Play and Entrance,' 'delay is both technique and content.' The techniques and methods of displacement which have become so recognizable in shorter lyric poems are displayed as artifices of content in the long poem. '... the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged' Shklovsky points out. We knew Pound's *Cantos* would never end because of the pressure in every syllable and line to shift into further confusions, links, trails, possibilities. His lifelong delay of the end was simply the desire to continue. But as soon as the poem moves outside itself, away from the prolonged perception of the compositional process, towards habitualization as in predictable repetition or towards the strong narrative cadence of 'story' for instance, the poem begins to end. The *Cantos*, Nichol's *Martyrology*, Zukofsky's *A*, and Olson's *Maximus Poems* are poems which maintain continuity and delay or minimize endings. For most long poems, however, the ending cannot be delayed for long.

### *The Kroetsch Solution*

For example. Robert Kroetsch has written several wonderful long poems which he bundles together in a continuing long poem called *Field Notes*.<sup>7</sup> Eli Mandel points out in his preface to the volume that Kroetsch 'puts things in order, in order to create disorder.' By placing these seemingly complete and 'contained' poems as part of an open-ended 'continuing poem' Kroetsch is providing a continuity for a larger, more intangible structure called *Field Notes* and thus allowing the various compositional processes of the eight separate poems to cohere in a potentiality they had otherwise abrogated in their previous publications. *The Sad Phoenician* is a delightful play of anecdote, idea, and image which works off a ground of syntactic parallelism.

and even if it's true, that my women all have new  
lovers, then laugh, go ahead but don't expect me to cry and believe you me I  
have a few tricks up my sleeve  
myself but I'm honest, I'm nothing if not honest; a friend of  
mine in Moose Jaw who shall remain anonymous tells  
me he met the girl from Swift Current who scorned  
my offer of sex in a tree house; a bird in the  
hand, he said, joking, of course



'and ... but ... and ... but ...' The repetition, as delightful as it is, eventually loses its element of surprise and the attention such perception offers. The poem acquires prolonged life, however, when placed within the new potentiality of *Field Notes*. Kroetsch's cunning solution delays the 'real' end and allows the 'real' long poem to continue his and the reader's engagement in the process of composition.

### *Intensivity*

There's a line in the 'Articulation (sic) Deformation in Play' section of Nicole Brossard's *Daydream Mechanics*<sup>8</sup> which has always struck me as a good example of how estrangement works at a minute and particular level.

river moulded in the calm flood as fierce and flora fl

Her perception of the language is so sharp and intense here that she is able to use the root etymon 'fl' to jar the poem into the real 'proprioceptive' statement she intended by beginning the poem with a reference to 'muscle.' In *MHTI* 'proprioceived':

Wait for the mind to stop for the writing to go ahead into the rush for the hand to hold the head's waiting in place of an image caught movement of the world at a standstill picture I thought to write to move could be a movement of the movement Fenellosa naturally more music in the body heaving the mind at work in the body syntax synapse to jump the spot or specific junction shipped into the text with the mind caught thinking earth earthing world world music a synapse rhythm of body convulsion call it proprioception call it desire but only override the 'eme' with something there something actual the ing always inging for example like S. of the grapheme saying it into the page living and longing keeps (the baseball in there somewhere) invisible visible<sup>9</sup>

Brossard is a master of defamiliarization, from the particle of the letter or syllable to the whole form. Her poems, prose-poems, and books (as well as the texts of other Quebecois feminists which haven't been mentioned very much at this conference ... important texts for me) are evidence of how the attention to freshen the long form requires what Charles Olson calls an 'intensivity.'

In a 1968 BBC interview Olson indicates the importance of the singular instant in writing.

One wants a narrative today to ... strike like a piece of wood on a skin of a drum or to ... be plucked like a string of any instrument. One does not want narrative to be anything but *instantaneous*.... In other words, the problem, the exciting thing about poetry in our century is that you can get image and narrative both to wed each other

again, so that you can get both extension and intensively bound together.<sup>10</sup> (*italics mine*)

In the *Maximus Poems* Olson is working with images of history, mythology, Gloucester, etc. He is creating an image of the world and he must constantly battle with the tendency of narrative to extend. The danger, as I've mentioned, is that it will extend outside the poem into a referential grid which is conclusive. Olson, like Brossard, recognizes the need to stop the narrative and prolong the image by intensifying the moment. Witness Olson's 'intensity' in 'Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27'<sup>11</sup> where he begins the poem with images of his youth in Gloucester, baseball at dusk, the geography, his mother and father at the Rexall convention, 'I come back to the geography of it,' etc., and then:

This, is no bare incoming  
of novel abstract form, this

is no welter or the forms  
of those events, this  
Greeks, is the stopping  
of the battle

This is, as Barrett Watten says in his essay 'The Politics of Style,' 'aimed at a disruption of commonplaces of rational procedure.'<sup>12</sup> It is a 'stopping.'

In order to prolong the moment, and the perceptions available in the delay, the movement, the expectation of movement, must be disturbed and fragmented. But the 'stopping' cannot be a closure so the disruption paradoxically does move the poem forward as well. In *The Martyrology* Nichol creates a labyrinthine network of incomplete thought loops in order both to dwell in and explore those loops as well as to generate the next step forward. That is, he wants to continue, he really doesn't want to stop. He's stopping in order to continue. Let's follow a few of the links in his chain in Book V. A stanza in link 4

this poetry of place & places  
traces of earlier rimes  
out-takes of the muse's movement thru me  
or my own grappling with a wish to speak  
each one a bridge i chose not to take  
reasons lost now in the years between

can be followed by these lines in link 6

bridge that flowers  
bridge that is the clicking of my teeth turning



tongue twisting back on itself

all of which can be shot forward to some concrete visual or sound text in link 11. Through the typically unpredictable vertical hinging by paradigmatic thought suffixes<sup>13</sup> (the analog class ... those vertical structures that only get connected because they're placed there) (bridge to bridge; bridge to teeth; teeth to tongue twisting; tongue twisting to the sonic visualization of the last letter of a list of seemingly syntactically unconnected words) Nichol creates an imagic flux governed only by the speed of thought. This is a good example of the '... extension and intensivity bound together' which Olson sees as the advantage of a focus on the moment. Viktor Shklovsky suggests, further, that this arresting of the movement is for the sake of continuity and that this, in fact, constitutes a definition of poetry.

In our studies of the lexical and phonetic composition of poetic speech, of word order, and of the semantic structures of poetic speech, we everywhere came upon the same index of the artistic: that it is purposely created to de-automatize the perception, that the goal of its creation is that it be seen, that the artistic is artificially created so that perception is arrested in it and attains the greatest possible force and duration, so that the thing is perceived, not spatially, but, so to speak, *in its continuity*. These conditions are met by 'poetic language ...' Thus we arrive at the definition of poetry as speech that is braked, distorted.<sup>14</sup> (*italics mine*)

Just tap the breaks lightly, my father warned when he was teaching me to drive, or else you'll lock them and screech to a complete stop, slide into an oncoming car or ditch, or wear them out.

### *Cadence, and some other notes*

The delayed cadence, as in music, becomes a matter of devising 'imminent' endings out of our desire for rest and conclusion. In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* Marjorie Perloff talks about reading John Ashberry's poem, 'These Lacustrine Cities.'

Reading Ashberry's text is thus rather like overhearing a conversation in which one catches an occasional word or phrase but cannot make out what the speakers are talking about.... And yet one does keep listening. For the special pleasure of reading a poem like 'These Lacustrine Cities' is that disclosure of some special meaning seems perpetually imminent.<sup>15</sup>

Ashberry's poem is not a long one but the device of avoiding full recognition has become a necessity to the long-poem writer at the level of the cadence. The anticipation and imminence beckons. The pleasure of anticipated cadence is a prime factor in Kroetsch's use of the 'and ... but' in *The Sad*



*Phoenician* and of the link possibilities in Book V of *The Martyrology*. In his presentation earlier this week Nichol noted:

one of the things the Concrete Poetry movement taught us as writers was to reclaim the small gesture. some texts need to exist separate from our desire to 'collect' them. once we become sensitized to what is happening tonally, imagistically, rhythmically, etc. within the smaller gestural works we are then in a position to introduce notes with exactly those qualities into a larger composition.<sup>16</sup>

The prosodic matrix in the basic relationship of syllable, line and cadence is there for the long poem just as it is for the short lyric but the quality of imminence can become a more outstanding characteristic in the long poem. I fancy Edmond Jabes sextet, *The Book of Questions*, as a long poem in which the next line could be a novel, for example. But then cadence as an actual ending construct becomes inoperable. The poem, or text (a more suitable term for Jabes' book) can shun the resolution of itself in order to keep going, to stay alive. This has become a common awareness about cadence in the compositional stance, as evidenced in a couple of recent poems. George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*<sup>17</sup> could, as the poet says, 'refuse a closing couplet.' Though Bowering is aware of the possibility he chooses not to refuse to close the poem as a book. In *Convergences*<sup>18</sup> Lionel Kearns 'cannot guarantee' another of the 'numberless endings' in his 'continuous sense of disorder and confusion.'

Another aspect of the prosody that gets generated through 'estrangement' is silence. Erasures and absences. In a book called *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* John Chernoff indicates the matrix in African drumming.

The music is perhaps best considered as an arrangement of gaps where one may add a rhythm, rather than as a dense pattern of sound. In the conflict of the rhythms, it is space between the notes from which the dynamic tension comes, and it is the *silence* which constitutes the musical form as much as does the sound.<sup>19</sup>

And in a short essay called 'Silence' the American poet Rae Armantrout lists some of the methods for achieving 'cessation.' She says:

Suppose a writer wants to make room in her work for silence, for the experience of cessation; how is this accomplished? 1. She may end a line or a poem abruptly, unexpectedly somehow short of resolution. 2. She may create extremely tenuous connections between parts of a poem. 3. She may deliberately create the effect of inconsequence. 4. She may make use of self-contradiction or retraction. 5. She may use obvious ellipsis. She may use anything which places the existent in perceptible relation to the nonexistent, the absent or outside.<sup>20</sup>

And one of the ways the generation of long forms is actualizing is in the



prose-poem, perhaps another way to allow minute narrative methods into the poem in that syntax is given more play there. Brossard, Marlatt, Szumigalski, and many other women have been exploring this (though Brossard prefers the term 'text'). Ron Silliman, in a wonderful essay called 'The New Sentence,'<sup>21</sup> describes the recent re-emergence of the prose-poem in the San Francisco area.

There could be problems, however. Again, at this conference, Nichol observed:

to alter is native to some of us, the desire to create the alter native tongue. but maybe the clue is to alter natives to narrative. that's what steve keeps saying. steve mccaffery keeps saying, 'the real crisis is with the readers.' we can't assume we're speaking their native tongue.<sup>22</sup>

And there are dangers as these techniques become accepted and stylized. Simon Watney, while pointing out the romantic roots, in a wonderful collection of essays on photography edited by Victor Burgin, has traced the use of 'ostranenie' as a technique in photography.

... the entire theory of *making strange* can be seen to have been rooted in a fundamentally bourgeois abstraction of 'thought' from the rest of material life, with a strongly idealist emphasis on the determining primacy of ideas.

... in practice the devices of 'ostranenie' tended to become reified, to become seen as intrinsically 'correct,' at which point they slid into mannerism. They became vulnerable both to that Modernist aestheticism which values the innovative purely in stylistic terms for its own sake, and also to the totalitarian elements within the Romantic tradition which would seek to iron out all human differences, in the name of Art, the Proletariat, Truth or whatever. Thus *making strange* ceased to respond to the demands of specific historical situations, and collapsed into stylization.<sup>23</sup>

But I don't think it is simply or only a matter of history or ideology. Ostranenie is a compositional stance. Writing needs to generate fresh perception, even when the strange becomes familiar.

Put there to indicate nothing necessarily but its own possible dimensions from everywhere else that it simply participate in the flow fish as vector or some platonic creek homing in on the spawn of itself or 'emeness' probably of the world to hold all writing actually in motion witnessable to both river and salmon one can't know the individual ocean's accumulation to ward off the trace or the limiting container of the 'universe' could change at a touch the guideline-point or hologrammer effect what'd he say not just dual but 'four steps: negative / positive (forward) & negative / positive (backward), or no-yes / no-yes' not as a grid not as a plan but at every single point a part of the whole picture to the very piece of gravel originally probably what we believe, the water, the egg<sup>24</sup>



## NOTES

- 1 Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique,' in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12.
- 2 *The Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Lionel Trilling (Doubleday, 1951), p. 103.
- 3 'Music at the Heart of Thinking,' *Open Letter*, Fifth Series, No. 7, Spring 1984, pp. 33-39.
- 4 'For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem,' *Dandelion*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1981, pp. 61-85.
- 5 *The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (Lantzville, B.C.: Island Writing Series, 1983). Originally presented to the Simon Fraser University weekend conference / festival 'The Coast is Only a Line,' July 25, 1981.
- 6 From bpNichol's presentation at the York Long Poem Conference.
- 7 *Field Notes The Collected Poetry of Robert Kroetsch*, (General Publishing, 1981). The title page says 'Field Notes 1-8, a continuing poem.'
- 8 *Daydream Mechanics*, translated by Larry Shouldice (Coach House Press, 1980), p. 63.
- 9 'Music at the Heart of Thinking.'
- 10 *Muthologos*, The Collected Lectures & Interviews, ed. George Butterick (Four Seasons Foundation, n.d.), Vol. 2, p. 80.
- 11 *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George Butterick (Univ. of California Press, 1983), p. 184.
- 12 *Poetics Journal*, No. 1, January, 1982, p. 56. The approach I use here re Olson is taken from Watten.
- 13 See Samuel R. Levin, *Linguistic Structures in Poetry*, *Janua Linguarum* 23 (Mouton, 1964).
- 14 As cited in Ron Silliman's essay, 'Migratory Meaning,' *Poetics Journal* No. 2, September 1982, p. 32.
- 15 Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 10-11.
- 16 From bpNichol's presentation at the York Long Poem Conference.
- 17 George Bowering, *The Kerrisdale Elegies* (Coach House Press, 1983), p. 137.
- 18 Lionel Kearns, *Convergences* (Coach House Press, 1983), beginning, n.p.
- 19 As quoted in 'from From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate' by Nathaniel Mackey in *Code of Signals*, ed. Michael Palmer (10 30, 1983), pp. 11-12.
- 20 Rae Armantrout, 'Silence' in *Poetics Journal* 3 (May 1983), p. 30.
- 21 Ron Silliman, 'The New Sentence' in *Hills* 6/7, Spring 1980, pp. 190-217.
- 22 From bpNichol's presentation at the York Long Poem Conference.
- 23 Simon Watney, 'Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror' in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin, pp. 154-176.
- 24 'Music at the Heart of Thinking.'



*Discussion*

**Steve McCaffery:** I have a question for Dennis. I was very troubled at one point with alternative polyphony. And your reading of Al Purdy's poem. I'd like to address to you what I felt: there was the modulation much more in your voice than that presence. I would find that very hard to actually locate and realize in texts. I felt that slide, and it's a slide I think we have to address with a certain rigour between a particular reading. I could really sense that modulation there. But I would have to challenge where that would be seen in the text.

**Dennis Lee:** It's a good question, how much you can score on the page. I think, Steve, that if you sat down with the poem on the page you would, in fact ... I mean there is a 'hardy-har-har' quality at the beginning that I think really is on the page, and there is a kind of breathless stammering towards the end. But I would certainly agree that I was pitching it a lot more strongly with my voice than I think most people would find there on the page. But I don't think that I was just bringing that to it ... the whole question of scoring and what-not is ... it's what the notation issue is addressing itself to. Did you feel in fact that you ... I mean, was it a question for you or did you feel that Lee is taking a monophonic poem and sliding some polyphony onto it?

**McCaffery:** Well, actually what I felt was a kind of unnecessary confusion from the voice. And phonics. I think voice brings in a whole kind of ideological layer that has nothing with phonia. There is the sound that one can relate to just in ...

**Lee:** A voice can be – we're not talking about making your vocal cords go. I hear a voice on the page when I see it. And the reading I was doing I was trying to enact vocally the voice I hear on the page.

**McCaffery:** That to me would be suspect. I don't know how that could actually be shown from the particular work.

**Reaney:** It's right there in the context. You can't read it any other way than Dennis read it.

**McCaffery:** I would challenge that.

**Reaney:** Nonsense. [Laughter.]

**McCaffery:** Actually, I'm not into sound; I'm talking about the construction behind the sound.

**Reaney:** The context definitely means that you read it the way Dennis read it. And also Al Purdy drinks, and I think that's one way of blurring the notes together. [Laughter.] We've got to make the beer into a rhetoric because having it in a bottle is too easy.

**Kroetsch:** David, where are you? We need you now to be chairman.

**David McFadden:** I think Purdy went through about 20 years of writing poetry like that where he starts out with voice A, becomes embarrassed by it, switches over to voice B, becomes embarrassed by it, and then stops. [Laughter.]

**Russell Brown:** Well, to come back again to the poem Dennis read, I think I agree with the reading but Dennis, would you distinguish between voice and tone for us – its poetic qualities. In a way, I feel it's a change of tone as much as a change of voice.

**Lee:** I think my terminology is probably slippery enough here that I wouldn't know how to do that. How would you understand the distinction between voice and tone?



**Brown:** I guess I'm not sure in fact. Maybe you and I are using it in similar ways, the way in which both things said seem to be consistent with one speaker, and therefore one voice, but the speaker is changing the way in which he is speaking because of things that are happening inside of his mind. Is that what you mean by two different voices?

**Lee:** That's not a bad pass at it. But it has to do with where pauses come, the kinds of images that are coming in, or no images at all, the stance of a speaking 'I', whether that's being thrust forward or muted, has to do with line length and line breaks very strongly. It's defined by everything in the poem.

**Stephen Scobie:** I agree with Russell. The point I would make in response to that bit in your paper is: that that is not really a polyphonic poem, it's a monophonic poem ... and the one voice that is there is the voice of Purdy's persona, whom we've all come to know and love. And there are – I think Russell is absolutely correct – what you have there is two tones, and that's something completely different from the kind of radical gap between the voices you get in Pound's *Cantos*, or in *The Waste Land*. It's not that the transition is more abrupt, it's that the two things actually are further apart from each other.

**Louis Dudek:** Except that Pound used different voices actually in his own speech. He would throw himself at somebody talking in a sort of parodistic style. He didn't have only one voice of his own. He was a man who talked like an actor assuming different sounds, different voices. That has to be taken into account.

**Gary Geddes:** About fifteen years ago, Purdy in an interview was asked about the point at which he found his own voice. He objected to that notion. He said the poet has many voices and he complained about Housman who wrote as if he always got out of bed on the same side. [Laughter.] And so you see in Purdy's poems this constant shifting at least of point of view. He feels uneasy about making statements so he is always qualifying and undercutting. But that in itself finally became a formula for him, too. It became an aspect of his voice that was easy to parody. He had to break that.

**Dorothy Livesay:** We seem to have two utterly different points of view – here, and in the morning group. The morning group is concerned with the poem reaching the people whereas the afternoon group is totally concerned with how it sounds to poets. I'd like to bring us way back before this so-called postmodernism, perhaps to one of the great originators in the linking of rhythm and sound to meaning and a voice speaking for people, namely a name we haven't heard at all – Whitman. I would like to ask any one of you down there to deny Whitman. Whitman managed to do both, to be concerned with rhythm, sound and all the segments of language as well as to have a real voice for the people and to be speaking to them.

**Charles Bernstein:** I'm willing to deny that if you'd like. [Laughter.] I mean do you know how many people Whitman reached, how many people ... do you think as many people as watch TV today? The issues which you raise, which you raised this morning are – first of all, the initial assumption that you make suggests that poets are not people, which I think is a genuine political mistake. You say ...

**Livesay:** Well, what percentage of the people are they?

**Bernstein:** ... it's not relevant ... you're talking about the nature of communica-



tion within a society and different types of communication. This society is dominated by a certain kind of mass communication which I suspect – and what I take to be a politics that we might share from a left point of view is filled with a content anyway. I'm just trying to think where we might agree just to start with which is hateful, let's say, and destructive to the values which I believe in. I think that you can't separate that content from the form in which that mass communication exists. And I think that when you make this argument somehow, that the range of the audience is a criterion for the validity of the communication, you have essentially given up whatever ground of political struggle can exist to create a different type of society. You've simply ceded the basis where the struggle exists. The problem is not poets and writers trying to understand how different things come together to mean things, the problem is a reductive system of reading values which is institutionally operated, and which is financed by the kinds of mass communication that we're subjected to. The way to change that is to change reading values. I don't accept that it's so difficult to read the kinds of poetry that we're talking about. I think that people read and deal with much more complex structures continuously. To read *People* magazine I find dazzling. I don't know half the references – it's more complicated than Olson. You can have a 400-page George Butterick of *People* magazine in 10 years or you won't have any idea who these people are. So I basically disagree with the entire premise of that kind of split. And I think what we've got to address in the terms that you're talking about, politically, is the issue of reading values. And how we can develop more creative kinds of reading so that when one doesn't understand something one doesn't feel 'we can't deal with that; we can't understand it.' I mean that's the problem with Leninism, and that the reason why people like Shklovsky were murdered by the centralist oriented government that continues in the Soviet Union in one form or another today. Those people who were involved with defamiliarization were leftist, they were trying to create a different kind of society. It is not difficult to understand Malevich, it is not easier to understand Andrew Wyeth. They're different forms of ideology, different forms of communication. Malevich does not communicate less than Whitman. Whitman is very esoteric to very many people who don't have that experience. Many gay people would speak about the suppression of the fact that Whitman is gay. And the gay voice not being there. And so when you read Whitman you're not really seeing the context in which he was operating, and which he, in his own time, was marginalized. So I think when you raise that issue that way, you really do an injustice to poets by differentiating them from people. We are people, trying to deal with these issues at a level where we can work.

**Livesay:** But it isn't a level that'll reach the ordinary man who's concerned with earning his living and all the frightful threats to life on this planet.

**Bernstein:** I think there are lots of different ways that you can try to reach this ordinary person. I don't think that in every effort we make as people we should try to reach the maximum possible audience. I think in some efforts, in terms of overt political organization, in terms of social transformation, at that level one has responsibilities to reach this large audience that you say. But I think that if we restrict ourselves to activities in that realm we have actually given up the area in which the struggle needs to take place in order to achieve the kind of transformation of society which I



think perhaps we have in common.

**Geddes:** Can any poet change the reading habits in his society by ignoring them, by marginalizing himself? I'm not worried about poets who know the story they're going to tell me in the narrative. I'm worried about poets who are read only by people who already know what the poet has to say. Edward McCourt's title 'A Music of the Close' has been alluded to a couple of times and his protagonist, it seems to me, Neil Fraser stands as a kind of admonition to every poet who delays the moment of closure, who refuses to complete the form that he has chosen. Neil's unfinished sonnets, his unfinished formal poems, he eventually puts them into the fire at the urging of his wife Moira, and his desire for music at the close, his assertion at the end of the novel, assertion in his own feelings, that he has found music at the close is in some sense a false assertion. He is of course first given the notion of music at the close by Charley Steele who is dying an incredibly strange death. I just wonder if poets can afford to retreat.

**Bowering:** Have you ever heard of anybody else outside of the university reading Edward McCourt?

**Bernstein:** I was going to say myself something similar to that. You're asking me about retreat and I don't understand the fact.

**Reaney:** Yes, lots of people outside of the university ... my mother, for example ...

**Bowering:** I've never heard of anybody outside of a university reading it.

**Reaney:** Well, that doesn't mean anything, George.

**Fred Wah:** I just want to respond to his sense of the poet retreating. I don't see poets who are working with language and trying to grapple with what I see to be new possibilities in language as retreating from anything. In fact, I see it quite the reverse, and I'll use Nicole Brossard as an example of this. Her politics are very specific: lesbian, separatist, Québécoise. Her job as she sees it as a poet is to discover a language which is more of her own because if she continues to yack yack away in the paternal language that she's inherited in her society and, in that, try to speak to the people, she's simply propagating the older structures and gets caught up in that. So it's not a matter so much of retreating as of working more intensively to try to break those structures down and ...

**Comment:** She still has to intrude into them though. She has to use language that other people can understand in order to get into the social process and change it.

**Wah:** All of us can understand all language; no, language isn't the problem.

**McCaffery:** We're talking of retreat when historically this has been called the vanguard. I think at this point you're assigning onto writers a very false persona. I think historically writers have inherited this sense of somehow being an epic person, a mystique that's got to be fought off. And from what I can see, what's happening today around this issue is a resistance of being sucked into quantification. Like it's a whole fabrication of the masses, the common man, the average person. I think that's an insult to a multi-cellular hominid. What you have, in fact, is a retreat into a kind of humility, not a specialization, but an ability to get away from totalization. What Charles was talking about in his dealing in an interrelationship of parts is very much what is now defining a new type of writer. And what that writer is challenging is the whole credibility of these inherited things of 'reaching the masses' as if somehow



there's a moral value in 300,000 people reading you, rather than 35 ...

**Livesay:** I can only answer in terms of my own experience, namely, woman after woman at readings that I do, young women, come up and say, 'You're saying what I feel and I haven't been able to say it.' It's that sense of the poet reaching the person ... it's the poets ...

**Andy Payne:** But it's not as though the poetry would ever be exhausted by its ability or lack of ability to represent somebody's political situation. It's not as though that representation is ever occurring outside of the real, is ever occurring outside of the political. It seems to me what you want to obfuscate here is the politics of representation. The whole politics of power that happens when you make this rhetorical implication to the ordinary man, this ordinary man who is going to secure the truth of your discourse.

**Livesay:** Well, I should have said, everyday woman.

**Payne:** And I think for bad or for worse ... the real politics is going on.... It has nothing to do with the adequacy of that representation but in fact the politics of representation itself.

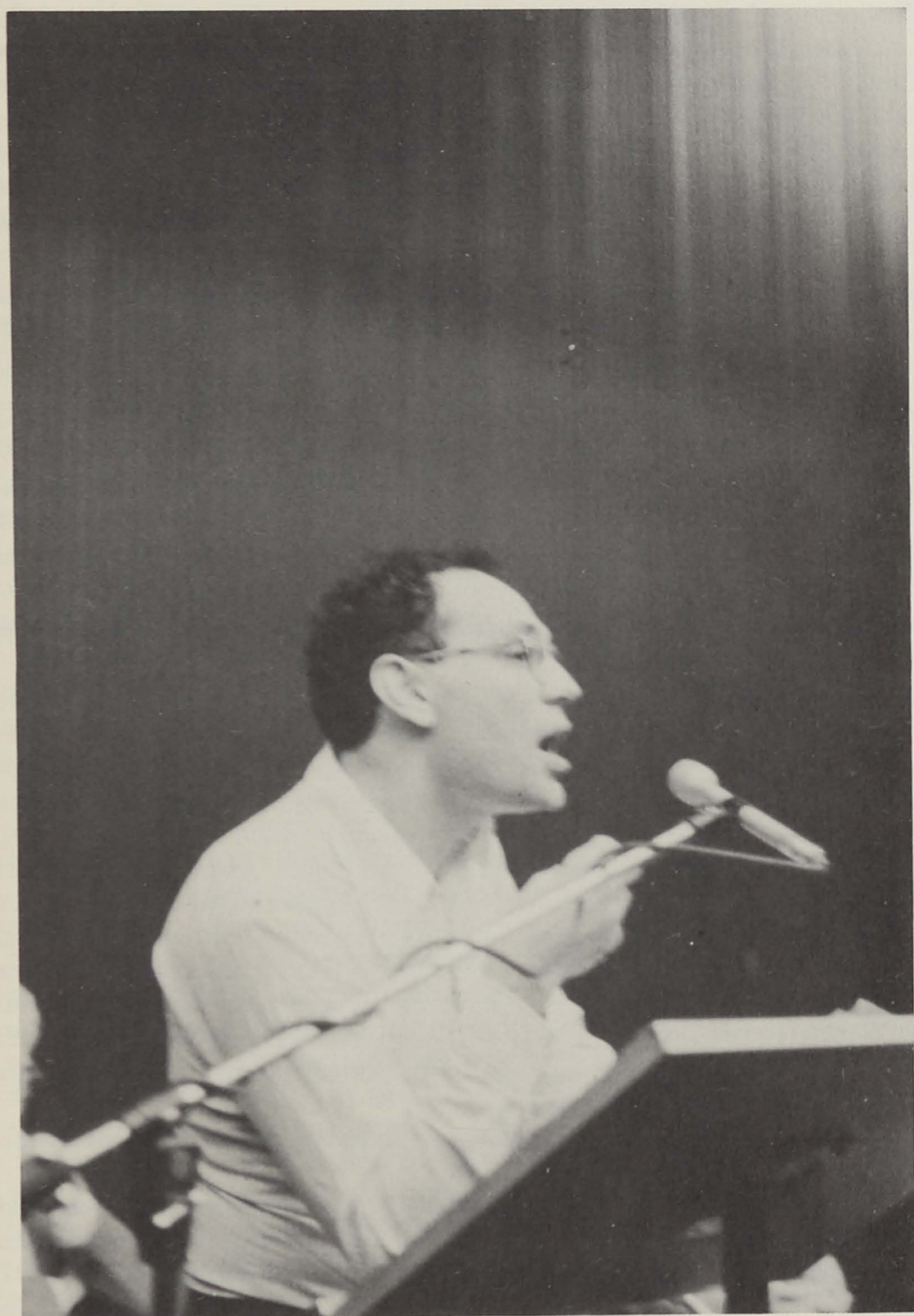
**Livesay:** I'd like to hear from Dennis; he tried to speak. [Laughter.]

**Dennis Cooley:** I think what we're hearing in this attack upon these people is a version of a conservative myth. There once was a time when poets were good and articulate and audiences read, and everybody sat by their firesides and read Blake and Tennyson as they still do, or ordinary people do. The version is strange. We're invited to believe that people will go home and read Tennyson every night but they won't read Dennis Lee. Well I don't think that's true. They're not reading Tennyson either. [Laughter.] A point about audience. I think the point is that all kinds of poetry can reach all kinds of people. What's happened is that they're denied access to audiences in this country for all kinds of reasons. I think we can all identify those and have a long talk about what those reasons are. But there's a denied access. When Barrie Nichol does his readings or Bob Kroetsch does his readings people who don't read poetry in their lives get excited and say 'I had no idea you could do that; that's incredible!' The most electrifying reading I was ever at was one that Barrie Nichol gave. People had never heard of him. They walked – they *staggered* out of the room. [Laughter.]

**Nichol:** It was given in a bar, you idiot! [Laughter.]

**Cooley:** I've heard several very conservative scoldings against poets for doing the jobs that poets do: working with language with some care and skill and passion. Surely that's what poets have always done and what they should continue to do. The problem's not that the audience is stupid. There's a kind of contempt for audience – 'the audience won't care about these things, will not be moved by these things.'

**Nichol:** Partly I think the emotional problem is that a certain type of talking has often had attached to it the stigma of arrogance. That is to say if you're using a kind of difficult language, because that's the only way you have of articulating a thing, it's seen as arrogance. What I've always found is that if, as a human being – which is the point I think Charles was making – if as a human being you're willing to occupy that ground and talk about what you're doing with whoever the reader is that's also interested in engaging the text then.... In fact, I have found experientially, which is what Dorothy is saying too, what can happen is an opening up of possibility



Charles Bernstein



That it doesn't have to be a closing down or a turning off.

**Geddes:** I was just thinking of the essay that Randall Jarrell wrote called 'The Obscurity of the Poet' in which he talks about the two extremes of concern for audience: the *Divine Comedy* with its seven levels of meaning and the *The Reader's Digest* with barely half a level. And the poet in all ages is moving somehow between the extremes of populist writing and the extremes of esoteric eclectic writing, and you have to decide depending on where your point is in history and what the demands are

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this is one alternative to the intentionality of narrative structure tho, of course, not an alternative to intention. if i rearrange these notes each time i go to read them then each time we will hear a different tune. if i keep rearranging them even while i'm reading them then we could dwell on certain notes far beyond any intention of my own & thus produce wildly varying emphases & meanings. isn't that often what happens in conversation, in attempting to explain an idea to someone? and thus you appear much more insistent on certain ideas than was ever your intention?

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around you, where you fit in that spectrum. You move towards one end where we want the sacred texts that belong with the *Divine Comedy*, and all of us want to be able in our writing to have that degree of mystery that will keep people coming back to it. On the other hand, you also have a sense that you want to reach people and so you make your compromises sometimes. Yeats and Eliot did it; they began by saying, 'All we need is a few friends; we're writing for a few friends.' And as soon as they had an audience, acceptability, they reached for a much broader audience. I come from a tradition where, it is from the West, where it's pretty anti-intellectual, and we feel embarrassed to be poets. So you have a sense of respect for an audience and you want to say what you have to say in a short time and say it in a punchy way and get the hell out of there. For me, the use of the dramatic forms and the narratives is related to my sense of a slight uneasiness. That's why I didn't quite finish my ... [laughter] ... talk because I had the respect for the audience.

**Comment:** I thought that was continuity turning into discord. I thought it was a victory.

**Dudek:** The whole thing has changed in the West. We're hearing very very good things, but perhaps there's still a little confusion. Walt Whitman wanted to reach the entire American people. He had this idea for his poetry; in his lifetime he never did it. At the end of his life he was going to sell his poems out of a basket in Philadelphia; he was poor. After his death, of course, his poetry was read and studied across the continent. The same is true of us here. We may be writing for five people, for a few people. Anyone would admit, unless in some future time, whether in our lifetime or later, this becomes generally known as good poetry and people know it, or some part of it very well, you're not going to be a real poet. You're not a real poet unless this great audience comes to you, or a considerable audience eventually acknowledges it. Surely those are the two sides that reconcile the whole thing anyhow.

**Bentley:** Yes, Gary Geddes talked about compromise and so on. I'd just be very



interested to know from the people down there or anyone whether there isn't a sense of compromise, a sort of compromise taking place here. The type of poetry that is in a way being canonized, and being talked about, after all, in a Moot Court at Osgoode Hall in the home of Canada's lawgivers in a way, is a type of poetry that is profoundly anti-lawgiving, profoundly anti-canonization, profoundly anti-order, anti-control and in some ways attempts to subvert that. What on earth is happening here? Why is it happening? Isn't there a kind of flaw at the core of this activity which shows itself over and over again in the discomfort that Gary Geddes has just referred to, the discomfort of poets being asked to speak formally on their ideas about poetry which in a way they profess not to have. How can they have ideas about poetry and write the type of poetry that they're claiming to write? Isn't there a problem here?

**Geddes:** The discomfort I was talking about, I think you've misrepresented it somewhat. I try to write in dramatic forms that will disturb people, keep their attention. And I also feel somewhat uncomfortable getting too close to what I characterize as mere dabbling with words, playing with syllables, grunting in the margins. [Laughter.] I see some value in this; I certainly take some enjoyment in it. But I feel I'd get the ruler on my fingers if I did that.... But the discomfort that I spoke of, I spoke of in jest. If there were not four of us lecturing I'd be glad to talk for two hours about my theories.

**Dennis Lee:** I certainly think the process of trying to think discursively about poetry is a very different process from writing poetry. I find most of the time I resist speaking discursively about poetry. Once every three or four years it starts to feel as if something might come into focus and this conference happened to come at a time I thought I might try it. There are lots of people who enormously enjoy talking about their own project or the craft that they're in. And for other people it's total anathema to try. But is there a spectrum there too, don't you think, of how easy people are with ...? The one thing that I'm certainly convinced of is that you don't arrive at anything in the poetry that you're going to write by talking about poetry – or, very seldom. I think it's much more likely to be thrown up retroactively by what it is that you've been writing. It seems to me that often it becomes possible to say something that makes sense about a particular kind of writing you've been doing at the point where you're ready to grow out of that. You know, you can't do it anymore. I certainly know that just about anything I write appears to be at first a falsifying of just about everything I've said about writing in the past.

**Comment:** I was going to say just about every talk tonight, except, I think, Fred Wah's, could have withstood the imposition of a little bit of old-fashioned form because I found them all very formless. And it seems the lesson to me is that for a narrative to have any effect – and I think they all would have had more effect – if they could have had *form*. [Laughter.] So that it's taken the base out of all that I've learned from this morning's talks – which was that things became much more exciting and humorous if they had no form ... so I found there was a bit of a lesson in the formlessness of the other talks.

**Arnason:** I want to go back to the notion of music at the close which seems to me an unnecessarily mystical notion ... some visceral sense in the writer. Surely, every poem, story, whatever, is a reading act and it must at some point release the reader. It



must have some kind of closure. And there *will* be a closure – even arbitrary stopping is a principle of closure – you can probably limit, put a whole series, number them and say these are some of the methods used for closure. When you're talking about music at the close you're preferring not the architectural close of a traditional narrative, you're preferring a rhythmic close, one that picks up certain of the other rhythms. You've discovered that ... it's not a mystical thing. It can be quite easily set out what the methods are and what that means. Why are we talking about some strange sense? It is a *craft*.

**Dudek:** Just that crucial question about the difference between talking about poetry and writing it, the centre of this whole panel. Dennis Lee's discussion of Pound left out the thought that Pound always pushed forward that the poem was written for those who like to *think*. So that the relations between these images, visionaries, and so on, are actually supposed to be connected in the mind of the reader: to create thought. But they are presented as images and not as explicit didactic statements. So also Gary Geddes' point about the narrative is quite off on this business because a narrative, the need to communicate as narrative or as poetry, is not making explicit statements that you can paraphrase as things you believe, which you wanted. Actually it is open to different interpretations. That's what narrative *is* – that is, even the parables of Jesus are extremely complex and as many-sided as what you can get out of them. Because the method of creative imagination is different from abstract explicit statement. It's not statement, it's actually a form of communication which is open to different facets of meaning.

**Geddes:** I thought I mentioned that quotation by Galway Kinnell where he says that if we could get rid of parable we could speak the truth directly. And I spoke of that critically. Of course, narrative is parable. It has an intellectual structure but it creates its ideas through bodying them in action.

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## Open Letter

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