

Review: Soundings: Zaum, Seriality, And The Recovery Of The "Sacred"

Reviewed Work(s): *The King of Time: Poems, Fictions, Visions of the Future* by Velimir Khlebnikov, Paul Schmidt and Charlotte Douglas: *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe & Oceania, Second Edition, Revised and Expanded* by Jerome Rothenberg: *that they were at the beach—aeolotropic series* by Leslie Scalapino: *Paradise* by Ron Silliman

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Source: *The American Poetry Review*, JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1986, Vol. 15, No. 1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1986), pp. 37-46

Published by: Old City Publishing, Inc.

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# MARJORIE PERLOFF

## Soundings: *Zaum*, Seriality, And The Recovery Of The "Sacred"

APZ BOOKS

Marjorie Perloff's most recent book is *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Pound Tradition*, published by the Cambridge University Press in 1985.

Velimir Khlebnikov, *The King of Time: Poems, Fictions, Visions of the Future*. Translated by Paul Schmidt. Edited by Charlotte Douglas. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985. 255 pp. \$18.50.

*Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe & Oceania*, Second Edition, Revised and Expanded. Edited with commentaries by Jerome Rothenberg. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985. 636 pp.

Leslie Scalapino, *that they were at the beach—aeolotropic series*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985. 111 pp. \$9.50 paper.

Ron Silliman, *Paradise*. Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1985. 63 pp. \$7.00 paper.

"From the Modernism that you want," David Antin quipped some years ago, "you get the Postmodernism you deserve." It is an aphorism to keep in mind as we approach the end of the century. For surely it is not mere coincidence that Paul Schmidt's excellent and elegantly produced translation of the great Russian Modernist poet Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922) should appear, not, say, in the early sixties when the watchwords were spontaneity, confession, the "natural," the "deep image," but twenty years later when poetry has become increasingly self-conscious about the materiality of the signifier, when, for example, a philosopher like Derrida can base a whole book, *Signéponge* (Columbia University Press, 1984), on the notion that the name of the French poet Francis Ponge has cognates like *éponge* ("sponge"), which generates, in its turn, such words as *l'épouse* ("the wife") by the mere substitution of a *u* for its inverted mirror image *n*. If Pasternak is the Russian Modernist poet most congenial to the Lowell-Berryman-Jarrell generation, if Mayakovsky is the Russian Modernist who speaks most fully to O'Hara and Ginsberg, then Khlebnikov emerges as the "contemporary" of such "difficult" poets as John Ashbery and Jeremy Prynne as well as of the "Language" poets. Further, as a reinventor of the "primitive" and the "folkloric," Khlebnikov is also what Jerome Rothenberg calls, in his fascinating anthology of alternate poetries, a "technician of the sacred."

Victor Vladimirovich Khlebnikov (the archaic Slavic name Velimir was his own later invention) was born in a small village in Eastern Russia. His father, a provincial official and teacher, was also a dedicated ornithologist. Khlebnikov inherited a passionate interest in birds, and his first poems, written while he was a student of mathematics at the University of Kazan, refer to an ornithological expedition to the Urals as well as to folk and fairy-tale motifs. In 1904 he was jailed for a month for participating in an anti-government demonstration; in 1908 he transferred to St. Petersburg University, where he studied, in turn, biology, Sanskrit, and Slavic Studies.

By this time, Khlebnikov had become part of the Symbolist cénacle associated with the Academy of Verse, but he soon broke with the Academy and joined with David Burliuk, Alexandr Kruchenykh, and Vladimir Mayakovsky to form the group *Hylaea*, the nucleus of the later "Futurists." Collaborating with these poets and with artists like Malevich, Larionov, and Goncharova, Khlebnikov published a series of brilliant artist's books, wrote material for performance works like *Victory over the Sun*, and became the leading theorist of "the new poetry." In 1916, at the height of World War I, Khlebnikov was drafted into the army. "I am a dervish," he complained to his friend Nikolai Kulbin, "a yogi, a Martian, anything but a private in a reserve regiment." After some months, he got himself declared to be mentally unbalanced and was hence discharged. The following year he greeted the Revolution enthusiastically, issuing Futurist manifestos, and wandering from city to city reading his poetry. At Kharkov during the Civil War, he was arrested first by the Whites and then by the Reds; later, he wrote propaganda jingles for ROSTA (the Caucasus propaganda bureau) and lectured for the Red army in northern Persia. During the terrible famine of 1921-22, he developed chronic malnutrition and died in a Novgorod village on 28 July 1922. He was just thirty-six years old.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov's literary output is unusually varied, encompassing, as it does, poems, plays, stories, theoretical essays, political and artistic manifestos, and visionary treatises like *The Tables of Destiny*, in which the poet tries to explain the occurrence of wars, revolutions, and other major historic events according to complex mathematical laws.

Paul Schmidt and Charlotte Douglas have given us a generous sampling of this various work, although it is only fair to say that Gary Kern's earlier *Snake Train: Poetry and Prose* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976) is a com-

parable selection. Kern's edition has the advantage of providing us with transliterated versions of the Russian originals as well as with an Appendix of poems in Russian. I wish Schmidt and Douglas had included the Russian texts of such complex word-play poems as *Zaklyatie Smekhom* ("Incantation by Laughter"), *My charuemsya i churamesya* ("We chant and enchant"), or *Usad'ba noch'yu—Chingiskhan'* ("At night the manor—Genghis Khan!"), for the English alone cannot provide a replica of such permutations as those on the root *smekh* ("laugh") in the first of these poems: "O, rassmetes', smekhachi!/O zasmeites', smekhachi!/Chto smeyutsya smekhami, chto smeyantsvuyut smeyal'no. . . ." Still, Schmidt's translations are, on the whole, remarkably inventive poems in their own right, and since Khlebnikov is almost unknown in Anglo-America, I want to discuss, not the relative merits of the Schmidt and Kern selections, but the significance of Khlebnikov's *oeuvre*, as seen through the lens of the new Harvard book.

It was Roman Jakobson, for whom Khlebnikov was "perhaps the most important modern poet in the world," who first pointed out that Khlebnikov's language experiments—his use of puns, neologisms, homonyms, and nonsense words—were designed to disclose the hidden meanings that are always already there in language but that must be removed from the automatism of perception:

The unrivalled works of Velimir Khlebnikov, a versatile explorer in poetic creation, have opened a vast perspective on the inner puzzles of language. This artist's search for the "infinitesimals of the poetic word," his paronomastic play with minimal pairs, or, as he himself used to say, "the internal declension of words" like /m,eč/—/m,ač/, /bik/—/bók/, /bóbr/—/bábr/ and such verses as "/v, íd,il víd,il v,ós,in vós,in," (*videl vydel vësen v osen*) prompted "the intuitive grasp of an unknown entity". . . .<sup>2</sup>

"Intuitive" is the key word here. Khlebnikov's is not, as is sometimes thought, a "merely" formalist poetics but, on the contrary, a belief in the magic power of words. In the story "K" he writes: "I believe that before a major war the word *pugovitsa* [button] has an especially frightening meaning, since the war—even though as yet undreamed of—lurks in that word like a conspirator, a harbinger lark, because the root of the word is related to *pugat'* [to frighten]." There is no etymological relationship between *pugovitsa* and *pugat'*, but that, as Douglas and Schmidt point out, is precisely the point: "This kind of derivation, which linguists refer to as folk etymology, was for Khlebnikov the point of entry into [a] hidden net of coincidences and poetic correspondences" (p. 13).

The resulting poetic language was called *zaum*, a word Schmidt intelligently translates as *beyonsense*. The editors explain:

The word *zaum* was part of Futurist vocabulary, used by different poets in different ways. In Khlebnikov the word must be seen first as a function of its root, the word *um*: intellect, intelligence, reason, the rational faculty of the mind. *Um* implies the creation of "pilings," the foundations of the man-made structures that must sooner or later destroy the mind's unity with the natural world. *Um* also implies the separation of thinking man from the natural stuff of language: the shape, sound, and color of words. The opposite of *um* is magic, magic words, the part of language that contains a power inaccessible to the intellect and is always opposed to it. It is here that poetry stands—but poetry has been weakened during the nineteenth century, especially in Russia, by positivism and historicism. So Khlebnikov attempts a radical corrective: to reclaim a power for poetry by reaching back beyond (*za*) intellect (*um*) to the roots of language. (pp. 113-114)

In its yearning for transcendence, for a return to "nature," to "the roots of language," *zaum* has a Romantic cast. But despite what seems to be a Blakean distinction between intellect and instinct, reason and imagination, Khlebnikov's version of *Zaum* is, first and foremost, a hard-headed concern for the difference a phoneme makes. Consider the following:

*My charuemsya i churaemsya*  
*Tam charuyas', zdes' churayas',*  
*To churakhar', to charakhar',*  
*Zdes, churil', tam charil'. . . .*

(See ST, p.59)

In Schmidt's free translation, these word pairs become:

*We chant and enchant,*  
*Oh charming enchantment!*  
*No raving, no ranting,*  
*No canting enchantment!*



*This ranting enchantress  
Has cast her enchantment—  
We see what her chant meant!  
Here rant! There cant!  
You charming enchanter,  
Cast out her enchantment,  
Uncast it, uncant it,  
Discast it, discant it,  
Descant: Decant! Recant!  
He can't. She can't.  
Why can't he uncant?  
Ranting chanting  
No recanting.  
Discant, descant.*

(p. 20)

Here the variations on the root morpheme *chant* are extremely ingenious. Add the prefix *en-* and the word means something quite different; drop the *h* and watch *chant* become *cant*, its homonym *can't*, or the neologisms *uncant* and *decant*. In this context, the question "Why can't he uncant?" seems perfectly logical.

But Khlebnikov's *zaum* poems are rarely as lighthearted as this one. More frequently the dropping of a single consonant produces a new meaning, as when "sword" becomes "word" in Schmidt's translation of *Veter—penie*:

*Wind whose  
Song, wound  
Whose wrong?  
Sweat of sword  
To turn to word  
(I'm dead, I'm dead)  
Staining arms in sanguine streams.  
I renew, eye  
You, know you.  
Brave new.*

(p. 29)

Here the "Sweat of sword," a cliché of war rhetoric, "turn[s] to word" at the hands of the poet; the commonplaces of battle—the wind bearing "song," the "wound" that represents the "wrong" of one side or the other, the heroic bloodshed ("sanguine streams"), the "renew[al]" through death and the resultant "Brave new [world]"—these hackneyed images are absorbed into the parodic net of Khlebnikov's delicate little song with its refrain, "I'm dead, I'm dead," uttered parenthetically.

The poem's defamiliarization depends upon such features as the homonymy of "I"/"eye," the punning on "wound," and on "know," "renew," and "new," the diminution of "sword" into "word." The word "eye" in line 8 can be either noun ("I am an eye") or verb ("I eye you"). Again, the sound repetition is very intricate, the phonemes /w/ and /o/ linking the monosyllabic words, "whose," "wound," "wrong," "sword," and "word," even as the repeated /w/ links these words with the poem's first and last words, "Wind" and "new," and as "Sweat" alliterates, at least visually, with "sword," and as "Staining arms" is related to "sanguine streams" by both alliteration and consonance. The final lines are characterized by elaborate echolalia:

*I renew, eye  
You, know you.  
Brave new*

but, despite all the rhyming, closure is avoided by the introduction, in the final line, of a fragment. The wind's song thus ends on an equivocal note.

Just as these war poems defamiliarize Romantic notions of heroism, so Khlebnikov's "folk" and fairytale poems bring together the "primitive" and the modern in parodic riddles and nursery rhymes. A garden swing is bombastically described as "the enormous arboreal monster" threatening the little girl who becomes "an apple/In the branches of his shaggy arms." A fairy-tale riddle about a thunderstorm, replete with drooping yellow buttercups and "two castles [that] collapse" in "the kingdom of hearing," contains a discordant reference to risqué reading matter: "The yellow-backed book gets soaking wet." Indeed, the *rusalka* (river mermaid), *leshy* (goblin), and *vila* (forest enchantress) occupy a space inhabited by such abstract phenomena as numbers and the movement of the stars and planets. Thus "Numbers" ("Česla") begins:

*I see right through you, Numbers.  
I see you in the skins of animals,  
coolly propped against uprooted oaks.*

(p. 28)

And *The Tables of Destiny* contains numerous passages like the following:

**Time and space together seem to comprise a single tree of mathematics, but in one case the imaginary squirrel of calculation moves from the branches to the base, in the other from the base to the branches.**

(p. 179)

The tree of mathematics, the squirrel of calculation, the legendary city of Kitezh that rises magically from the bottom of a lake only to turn into



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a long equation with powers and superscripts that resemble shining medieval towers—these oddly disjunctive metaphors are also used with reference to the poet's self. Not that Khlebnikov is, in any sense, an autobiographical or confessional poet; when the "I" appears at all, the urge is always to subsume self into a larger mythic construct. Here, for example, is a parable of what we now call "the death of the author":

*When I was young I went alone  
 Into the dead of night;  
 My hair was thick  
 And touched the ground.  
 Night was everywhere  
 And oh it was lonely,  
 Wanting friends  
 And wanting a self.  
 I set my hair on fire,  
 Threw the bits in a ring around me;  
 I burned my fields and trees  
 And things felt better.  
 Arson in Khlebnikov acres!  
 Burning ego flickered in the dark.  
 Now I depart  
 With flaming hair  
 As WE;  
 Not I.  
 Go, uncompromising Viking!  
 Uphold your law, and your honor.*

(p. 34)

The destruction of what Charles Olson was to call "the lyrical interference of the ego" was to become a central tenet of the Language poets. But Khlebnikov's burlesquing of self-centeredness, his skepticism about Received Truths of whatever kind, reveals a Dada strain reminiscent, at least in Schmidt's translations, of the poetry of Frank O'Hara:

*Russia has granted freedom to thousands and thousands.  
 It was really a terrific thing to do,  
 People will never forget it.  
 But what I did was take off my shirt  
 And all those shiny skyscrapers the strands of my hair,  
 Every pore  
 In the city of my body  
 Broke out their banners and flags.  
 All the citizens, all the men and women  
 Of the Government of ME,*

*Rushed to the windows of my thousand-windowed hair,  
 All those Igors and Olgas  
 And nobody told them to do it,  
 They were ecstatic at the sunshine  
 And peeked through my skin.  
 The Bastille of my shirt has fallen!  
 And all I did was take it off.*

(pp. 35-36)

"Russia and Me" (*Ya i Rossya*), written in the early twenties when Khlebnikov was lecturing in Persia on behalf of the Red Army, sets up an elaborate metaphor in which the liberation achieved by the October Revolution is absurdly compared to the "liberation" of the poet's naked body in the course of a sunbath. "The Bastille of my shirt has fallen!//And all I did was take it off"—these lines gently mock the self-congratulatory stance of the revolutionaries even as O'Hara irreverently lampoons Cold War politics in "Khrushchev is coming on the right day!"

The projection of the self in such poems is at best oblique. As Charles Bernstein puts it with reference to O'Hara, "Russia and Me" "proposes a domain of the personal, & not simply assuming it, fully works it out."<sup>3</sup> Which is to say that Khlebnikov's poem probes the relationship of the poet, as isolated self, to the cataclysmic events of his time; nowhere does it express this particular poet's personal desires or allude to his personal history. For Khlebnikov, as the section called "Projects for the Future" makes clear, the most important poetic tasks are two: invention and prophecy. Apollinaire's famous aphorism "On ne peut pas porter partout avec soi le cadavre de son père," which Pound quoted approvingly in his *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916), is mild compared to Khlebnikov's formulation in "Futurian!" (also 1916): "We have made it very clear that 20th century man is dragging around a thousand-year-old corpse (the past), doubled over like an ant trying to move a log" (p. 125). Or again, in "The Trumpet of the Martians" (1916): "How can we free the speeding locomotive of the younger generation from the insolent freight train of the older generation, hitched on without our permission?" (p. 129).

Khlebnikov's visions of the future were startlingly accurate. In "Ourselves and Our Buildings. Creators of Streetsteads" he foresees a landscape of "glass sunflowers in the iron shrubbery," "cities of glass, shiny as inkwells, who compete among themselves for sunshine and a scrap of sky as if they were part of the vegetable kingdom" (p. 133). At present (i.e. 1918), cities, seen from directly overhead, "look like currycombs, like hairbrushes." But in the future of "winged inhabitants" it will be different:

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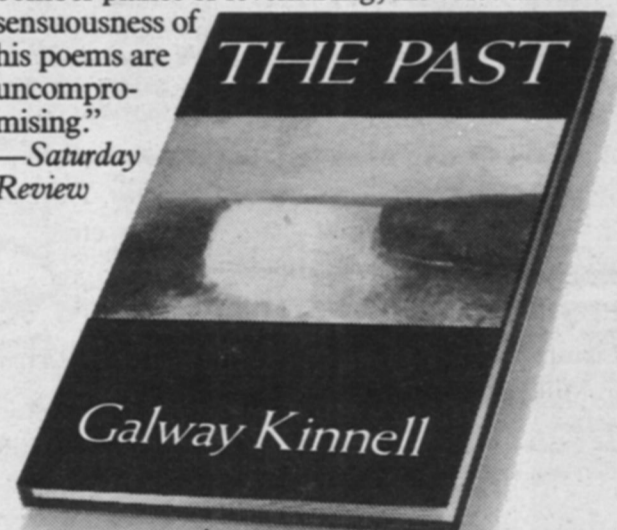
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In actual fact, the hand of time will turn the axis of vision upright, carrying away with it even that piece of architectural pomposity, the right angle. People now look at a city from the side; in the future they will look from directly overhead. The roof will become the main thing, the axis of the standing structure. With swarms of flyers and the face of the street above it, the city will begin to be concerned about its roofs and not its walls. . . . People will no longer gather in the vicious streets, whose dirty desire reduces human beings to residue in a washbasin; rather they will throng upon rooftops, beautiful young rooftops, waving their handkerchiefs after a giant levitating air-cloud. . . . (p. 134)

Khlebnikov further imagines the "yet-to-be city of the Futurians" as one where the inhabitants will live in mobile dwelling modules, containers of molded glass, mounted on wheels and set on tracks, in which they will travel about as they please. Again, his vision is not inaccurate, given the amount of time people now spend in airplanes, automobiles, and mobile homes. But Khlebnikov also recognizes the negative side of this advanced technology:

Just as a tree in winter lives in anticipation of leaves or needles, so these framework-buildings, these grillworks full of empty spaces, spread their arms like steel junipers and awaited their glass occupants. They looked like unloaded, unarmed vessels, or like the gallows tree, or like a desolate city in the mountains. And they gave everyone the right to own such a habitation in any city. Every city in the land, wherever a proprietor may decide to move in his glass cubicle, was required to offer a location in one of these framework-buildings for the mobile dwelling-module (the glass hut). And with a whine of chains the traveler in his glass cocoon is hoisted aloft. (p. 137)

The steel "gallows tree[s]" on which the glass cubicles travel have the "whine of chains." Claustrophobia is reinforced by the persistent presence of the new central authority, made possible by the miracle of technology. In "The Radio of the Future" (1921), Khlebnikov foresees a city made of "Radio Reading-Walls," taller than the highest houses. "Radio," he observes prophetically, "has solved a problem that the church itself was unable to solve and has thus become as necessary to each settlement as a school is, or a library" (p. 156):

The problem of celebrating the communion of humanity's one soul, one daily spiritual wave that washes over the entire country every twenty-four hours, saturating it with a flood of scientific and artistic news—that problem has been solved by Radio using lightning as its tool. On the great illuminated books in each town Radio today has printed a story by a favorite writer, an essay on the fractional exponents, a description of airplane flights, and news about neighboring countries. . . . This one book, identical across the entire

country, stands in the center of every small town, already surrounded by a ring of readers, a carefully composed silent Reading-Wall in every settlement. . . .

Earthquakes, fires, disasters, the events of each twenty-four-hour period will be printed out on the Radio books. The whole country will be covered with Radio stations. (p. 156)

Here in 1921 is a prophetic vision of our own televised and televising world: "If Radio previously acted as the universal ear," Khlebnikov posits, "now it has become a pair of eyes that annihilate distance" (p. 157).

## II

A pair of eyes that annihilate distance, "the unification of [the nation's] consciousness into a single will"—the image of Radio as "The Great Sorcerer" inevitably looks ahead to Big Brother. But the world that really interested Khlebnikov—a world beyond the "glass sunflowers in the iron shrubbery" of the futuristic city—was the timeless and spaceless realm beyond natural phenomena, a realm that we can enter only by means of *language*. In "On Poetry" (1919), Khlebnikov writes:

People say a poem must be understandable. Like a sign on the street, which carries the clear and simple words "For Sale." But a street sign is not exactly a poem. Though it is understandable. On the other hand, what about spells and incantations, what we call magic words, the sacred language of paganism, words like "shagadam, magadam, vigadam, pitz, patz, patzu"—they are rows of mere syllables that the intellect can make no sense of, and they form a kind of beyonsense [*zaum*] language in folk speech. Nevertheless an enormous power over mankind is attributed to these incomprehensible words and magic spells, and direct influence upon the fate of man. They contain powerful magic. . . . the prayers of many nations are written in a language incomprehensible to those who pray. . . . the language of magic spells and incantations rejects judgements made by everyday common sense. (p. 152)

The concern for the language of spells and incantations, for a ritual poetry characterized by "a flight from the *I*," relates Khlebnikov's work to Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*. Indeed, in his new section called "Europe & the Ancient Near East," Rothenberg includes Khlebnikov's version of the "Bald Mountain *Zaum* Poems," which begins:

*Kumara  
Nich, nich, pasalam, bada.  
Eschochomo, lawassa, schibboda.*

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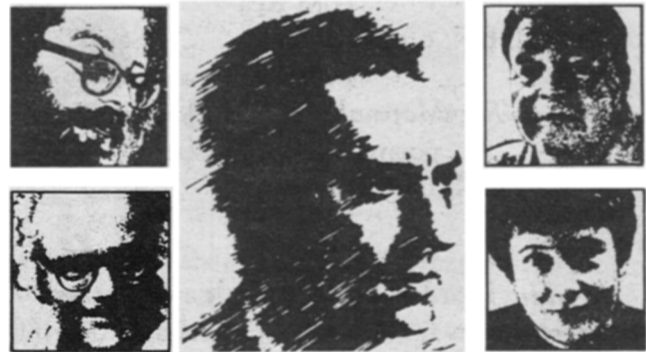
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A.a.o—o.o.o—i.i.i—e.e.e—u.u.u—ye.ye.ye.

(p. 361)

and his "commentary" pays homage to Khlebnikov's daring attempt "to break through the limits of conventional syntax & meaning" (p. 600).

*Technicians of the Sacred*, originally published in the milestone year 1968 and now extensively revised, primarily by the addition of European (Mesopotamian, early Greek and Roman, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, etc.) texts, has aroused a good deal of controversy. In the late sixties a score of poets hailed it as, in the words of Richard Kostelanetz, "the single most influential literary anthology of the past decade" (see rear book jacket). And in a recent discussion of ethnopoetics in *Parnassus*, Judith Gleason, herself a performance artist and "ethnopoet," explains:

Contemporary ethnopoetics, taking rise (a decade or so ago) at the confluence of anthropology and a modern poetry of "voices" seeking validation in performance, re-asserts the values of verbal art as oral (sung or chanted), as functional (magical in intent, either as part of a communal ritual or as personally integrative), as related to nature (bodily and ecologically), as mythic, oneiric, visionary, and at the same time open to supportive contributions from other artistic media. . . .

Rothenberg's "dream of a total art—and of a life made whole," far from being an idle vision, is, rather that of an indefatigable worker, uniting us in his traces. Stakhonovite of the sacred, like one of Rilke's bees of the invisible he goes about extracting the sweetness from meadows distant and close to home. . . . Thus *Technicians of the Sacred*, surely the outstanding anthology of our time, along with *Shaking the Pumpkin*, is already serving our contemporary sensibilities as once the comparable ardor of the brothers Grimm nourished those of our romantic ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Ethnopoetics in general and Rothenberg's "dream of a total art" in particular have come in for criticism by those who argue that, in his cult of the "primitive" and the remote, Rothenberg betrays his own nostalgia for origins, for an ethic of archaic and natural innocence and for a transcendent harmony and metaphysical wholeness at odds with late twentieth-century thought.<sup>5</sup> And further, Rothenberg's project has been criticized as a fuzzily Romantic claim to recuperate the "primitive" Other, an Other that by definition eludes our grasp and denies our appropriation. Thus, when Rothenberg declares, in "Pre-Face 1984," that "Our ideas of poetry—including, significantly, our idea of the poet—began to look back *consciously* to the early & late shamans of

those other worlds: not as a title to be seized but as a model for the shaping of meanings & intensities through language. As the reflection of our yearning to create a meaningful ritual life" (p. xviii), Post-Structuralist readers are likely to respond that we cannot, in 1985, recreate the "meaningful ritual life" of the Aztecs or the Basuto of Africa, that indeed the versions of "primitive ritual" anthologized in *Technicians of the Sacred* fail to recuperate the spirit of the originals.

But then how close to the "real" China of Li Po is Ezra Pound's *Cathay*? And how close do we want it to be? Like all of Rothenberg's extraordinary anthologies, *Technicians of the Sacred* must be understood less as a gathering of poems by others—in this case, a gathering of "primitive" poems from around the world—than as a long and complex poetic text by Rothenberg himself. The clue to Rothenberg's method is found in the "Pre-Face" to the first edition of *Technicians* in which he remarks:

Like any collector, my approach to delimiting & recognizing what's a poem has been by analogy: in this case . . . to the work of modern poets. Since much of this work has been revolutionary & limit-smashing, the analogy in turn expands the range of what "we" can see as primitive poetry. (p. xxviii)

This generalization is followed by an elaborate tabulation of analogies: for example, the "pre-literate situation of poetry composed to be spoken, chanted or, more accurately sung" is compared to our own "post-literate" situation (McLuhan's phrase) in which public readings and performance poetry have come to the fore. Or again, the "image-thinking" of "primitive" poetry is related to the deep-image poetry of the sixties, while the "minimal art of maximal involvement" of primitive cultures, an art that leaves "plenty of room for fill-in" by the spectator as ritual participant, is compared to postmodern concrete poetry on the one hand and the happening or "total theater" on the other.

But, as D.H. Lawrence might have put it, "Never trust the editor, trust the anthology." For the analogical relationships Rothenberg establishes are more difficult and unsettling than he seems to realize. In his "Pre-Faces," Rothenberg refers repeatedly to the "world that they & we share" (p. xxiii), but the actual format of the book stresses difference as much as likeness. Four-hundred thirty pages of "The Texts" are followed by almost two-hundred pages of "The Commentaries." The latter include bibliographical material, indicating the source of each text, Rothenberg's commentary on the given text, and then "Addenda," which is to say a series of paratexts that include quotations from history

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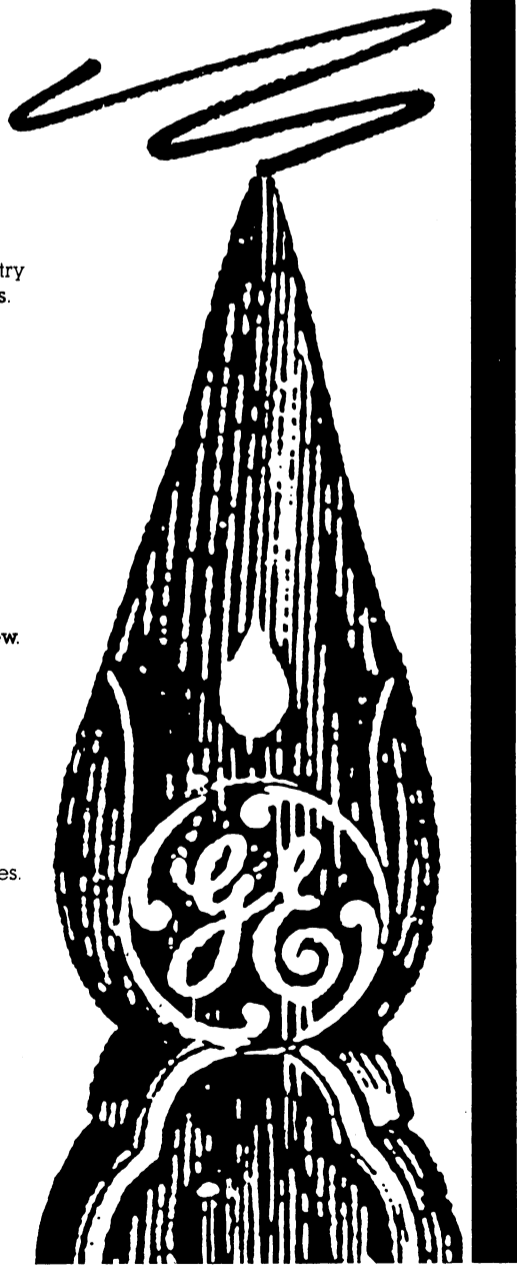
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or anthropology books, related foreign texts, contemporary poems, and so on. But the cited poems by Gary Snyder or Jackson Mac Low, the "calligrammes" by Apollinaire and August de Campos, the translations of Aimé Césaire and Pablo Neruda—are not so much "analogues" of their "primitive" counterparts as they are ironized and problematized versions. The resulting collage composition is itself a working-out of the title's oxymoron: it shows us what it means to be a *technician* of the sacred.

Consider, for example, the text called "Bantu Combinations" under the heading "Origins & Namings." The "primary text" itself (p. 16) takes up less than a page:

1.  
*I am still carving an ironwood stick.  
I am still thinking about it.*
2.  
*The lake dries up at the edges.  
The elephant is killed by a small arrow.*
3.  
*The little hut falls down.  
Tomorrow, debts.*
4.  
*The sound of a cracked elephant tusk.  
The anger of a hungry man.*
5.  
*Is there someone on the shore?  
The crab has caught me by one finger.*
6.  
*We are the fire that burns the country.  
The Calf of the Elephant is exposed on the plain.* (Africa)

The Commentary on these six small couplets takes up almost three pages (pp. 455–457). First, a reference to Rothenberg's source (Henri A. Junod's *Life of a South African Tribe* [Macmillan & Co., 1912, 1927]), then an elucidation as to how to read these gnomic Bantu verses:

Examples of plot-thickening in the area of "image": a conscious placing of image against image as though to see-what-happens. Apart from its presence in song, this juxtaposing of images turns up all over in the art, say, of the riddle—of which several of these "combinations" are, in fact, examples. Poem as opposition or balance or two or more images is also the basis of the haiku, less clearly of the sonnet. In all these the interest increases as the connection

between the images becomes more and more strained, barely definable.

Note that this is by no means a factual account. The phrase "plot-thickening," for example, refers to a specific Zen parable. In John Cage's account in *Silence*, "Sri Ramakrishna was once asked, 'Why if God is good, is there evil in the world?' He said, 'In order to thicken the plot.' " Again, the evident pleasure Rothenberg takes in the "conscious placing of image against image as though to see-what-happens" has to do with his own poetic rather than with the sonnet mode, the sonnet being a form traditionally more dependent upon rhetoric and the structure of argumentation than upon the juxtaposition of vivid images. For Rothenberg, the "Bantu Combinations" become forerunners of the Dada and Surrealist collusion of disjunctive images, of "strained, barely definable" associations. "Not subtlety . . . but *energy*: the power of word & image" that produces "vision." And he cites the following "Modern" analogues:

- (1) *Now I a fourfold vision see  
And a fourfold vision is given to me  
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight  
And three fold in soft Beulahs night  
And twofold Always. May God us keep  
From Single vision & Newtons sleep*

—William Blake (1802)

- (2) **The image cannot spring from any comparison but from the bringing together of two more or less remote realities. . . .**

**The more distant and legitimate the relation between the two realities brought together, the stronger the image will be . . . the more emotive power and poetic reality it will possess.**

—Pierre Reverdy

- (3) **The African image is not an image by equation but an image by analogy, a surrealist image. Africans do not like straight lines and false *mots justes*. A two and two do not make four, but five, as Aimé Césaire has told us. . . . African surrealism is mystical and metaphysical. . . .** —Léopold Sédar Senghor

Having presented the case against what Blake calls "Single vision" and Senghor the "straight line," Rothenberg gives us seven "Contemporary Combinations," analogous to the "Bantu Combinations," arranged in roughly chronological order. The first is Phillipe Soupault's "A church leaped up/exploding/like a bell," the second, a single line by Paul Eluard & Benjamin Peret: "Elephants are contagious." Then Gertrude Stein's one-line aphorism from *Tender Buttons*: "A white hunter is nearly crazy," and Kenneth Koch's five-word poem "In the Ranchhouse at Dawn," which reads: "O corpuscle!/O wax town!" And finally, the

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WOOD

*I repeated it.*

—Clark Coolidge

*A man torments the sun.*

*Cows are disturbed by their calves.*

—Barrett Watten

*the last days like this*

*a red stone*

*all we know of fire*

—Robert Kelly

Kelly's tercet is in fact the last of six stanzas of a poem called "New Moon Over Whaleback," which appeared in *Lunes* (1965). In the first edition of *Technicians*, Rothenberg reproduced the entire poem as a specific modern analogue to the Bantu Combinations. Kelly's poem begins with the stanza "this new moon low down/a plain sky/holding it in place," and proceeds to relate the moon rim in the black sky to the loss of the poet's beloved. In revising the Commentaries, Rothenberg evidently found "New Moon Over Whaleback" too coherent—a nice enough but fairly unexceptional sixties "deep image" poem. Accordingly, in the new edition he opts for the final tercet, inexplicable as that tercet is when taken out of context. The mystery of the image is thus a function, not of Kelly's own poetic structuring, but of Rothenberg's creative collage cut.

Collage composition is further complicated by placing the Kelly tercet, with its reference to "red stone" and "fire," next to Watten's line, "A man torments the sun," with its alogically connected corollary, "Cows are disturbed by their calves." Or again, Gertrude Stein's "white hunter" is given new life by its proximity to Kenneth Koch's "wax town," while Soupault's exploding church coexists with Eluard and Peret's contagious elephants. All these passages belong to larger wholes from which they are wrenched, the exception being Clark Coolidge's "Wood," whose single line, "I repeated it," can be taken to refer to chopping wood, or the "repeat" (grain) in the wood, or the repetition of identical trees in the "wood," and so on.

How do such minimalist works relate to the "Bantu Combinations" themselves? My own sense is that the latter are not as inexplicable or as "visionary" as Rothenberg would have us think. The Bantu speaker who says, "I am still carving an ironwood stick," no doubt a necessary item in a specific ritual, adds, not surprisingly, "I am still thinking about it." In #2, we have two parallel instances of decay and death: the lake drying up at the edges and the elephant killed by a small arrow. In #3, the projected "debts" are the consequence of the fact that "The little hut falls down." In #4, "The sound of a cracked elephant tusk" is compared

quite logically to another sound, "The anger of a hungry man." In #5, the question "Is there someone on the shore?" is the cry for help of a man whose finger has been caught by a crab. And in the final Combination, the "fire that burns the country" inevitably strikes "The Calf of the Elephant [which is] exposed on the plain."

Taken as a whole, moreover, the six-couplet "poem" contains the skeleton of a narrative: it relates the story of the carving of an arrow by a "hungry man," who has lost his "little hut" and is in debt, to be used to kill an elephant, a killing regarded as an inevitable ritual: "We are the fire which burns the country."

Does this mean that Rothenberg is somehow cheating the reader? Not at all. For one thing, the Bantu texts have a sophistication that lends credence to Rothenberg's central thesis that "'primitive' means complex" (p. 26). To compare the angry howling of a hungry man to "The sound of a cracked elephant tusk" is hardly naive. Secondly, Rothenberg uses these "primitive" analogues to create his own poetic text. Soupault's church that "leaped up/exploding/like a bell" has affinities to the elephant "killed by a small arrow," and the line "Elephants are contagious" can be inserted into the Bantu text itself so as to create resonance. Add to the African landscape a "White Hunter" who is "nearly crazy," a "Ranchhouse at Dawn," and the presence of "Wood" where an unknown "I" "repeated it," and we have what John Ashbery has called "an open field of narrative possibilities." Both the "primitive" and the "contemporary" text end, in any case, with the apocalyptic appearance of fire, the emblem of "last days." No wonder Robert Kelly's first five stanzas were eliminated.

"An assemblage like this one," says Rothenberg in his "Pre-Face (1984)," "is by its nature an anthology of versions" (p. xx). Precisely, and the "versions" are Rothenberg's own: it is, he, after all, who is the "technician of the sacred." Consider, for example, his startling conjunctions of Navajo and American Shaker sound poems (pp. 8-9) to Hugo Ball's Dada sound poem "Gadji Beri Bimba" (p. 445). Or the ritual naming poems of the Egyptians to Gertrude Stein's quite different speculations on the naming process in *Lectures in America*. Or the structure of Aztec Definitions, as recorded in the so-called Madrid and Florence Codices, to a postmodern definition poem like David Antin's "Definitions for Mendy" (p. 462). Or the rhythms of Eskimo Magic Songs to Rochelle Owens's "Song of Meat, Madness & Travel" (p. 562).

Indeed, *Technicians of the Sacred* can be understood as a gold mine of poetic forms and genres that can be (and have been) adapted by contemporary poets. Ritual naming song, shamanic chant, spell, visual poem, hieroglyph, definition poem, fragment, praise poem, quest romance—all these are paraded before the charmed reader's eyes as pos-



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and that it is very strong so strong  
that there is a kind of humming of the blood  
which attends it as an attendant would attend  
and that though strong it is also gentle

and that when it gets through blowing  
or at a certain moment in its blowing  
which no one can predict with certainty  
the grass will all be leaning and the trees  
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sibilities for writing in the present. The section called "The Book of Events" contains descriptions of rituals from around the world (e.g., the "Forest Event" from Hungary, the "Stone Fire Event" from Australia) that provide us with paradigms for the happenings of the sixties (Alison Knowles, La Monte Young, Carolee Schneemann, Alan Kaprow) as well as the more explicitly poetic performance works of the seventies like Vito Acconci's "Security Zone," Linda Montano's "Mitchell's Death," and Joseph Beuys's "Coyote: I Like America & America Likes Me."

As in the case of the "Bantu Combinations," Rothenberg's versions of primitive "Events" are purposely presented so as to illuminate their contemporary counterparts. "The editor," Rothenberg explains, "has taken a series of rituals & other programmed activities from a wide geographical area & has, as far as possible, suppressed all reference to accompanying mythic or 'symbolic' explanations." Such "distortion," he argues, "can have a value in itself. Like seeing Greek statues without their colors" (pp. 513-514).

An especially interesting example of the value such "distortion" may have is found in Rothenberg's commentary on "The Girl of the Early Race who made the Stars," an African Bushman origin poem narrated by the so-called "Kaboo," a name which literally means "dream." It begins:

My mother was the one who told me that the girl arose; she put her hands into the wood ashes; she threw up the wood ashes into the sky. She said to the wood ashes: "The wood ashes which are here, they must altogether become the Milky Way. They must white lie along in the sky, that the Stars may stand outside of the Milky Way, while the Milky Way is the Milky Way, while it used to be wood ashes." They the ashes altogether become the Milky Way. The Milky Way must go round with the stars; while the Milky Way feels that, the Milky Way lies going around; while the stars sail along; therefore the Milky Way lying, goes along with the Stars. (p. 32)

The source used here is Wilhelm H.I. Bleek and Lucy C. Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911); Rothenberg calls their workings "the best examples the editor knows of how a 'literal' translation, when handled with respect for the intelligence & sense of form of the original maker, can point to the possibility of new uses in the translator's own language" (p. 472). Specifically, these translations, so Rothenberg suggests, "call into question the distinction (still strong among us) between poetry & prose." Since primitive prose is based on the art of oral delivery and is, accordingly, more closely related to modern oratory than to printed literary style, its rhythms are much closer to what we consider "poetry" than to "normal" prose. "Today, too," says Rothenberg, "poetry & prose are coming to a place-of-meeting in the spoken language — & the distinctions made by previous centuries have come to mean much less." And he reads "The Girl of the Early Race who made the Stars" against Gertrude Stein's play "Listen to Me" (1936), which has a whole scene constructed from permutations on the sentences "No dog barks at the moon," "The moon shines and no dog barks," and "Because there are so many lights anywhere" (see p. 473).

The "place-of-meeting" of "poetry" and "prose" that Rothenberg discovers in the translation of the African Bushman text and relates to Gertrude Stein's admittedly quite different text "Listen to Me," is a confluence increasingly prominent in the poetry of the eighties. Leslie Scalapino's new book *that they were at the beach* begins with a twelve-page prose sequence called "buildings are at the far end." Here is the opening:

The man taking me in the car, whom I hadn't met before, knew people I'd merely observed—they were in a different place

Going fast, I thought of them. It was hot and here there was an area where one didn't go anywhere—a setting that is run-down—and no one is walking. We see a man on the corner. The man in the car speeding up and going through red-lights stopped there—we were still in the run-down area—where the person on the corner is, the man who sees him beginning to drive again. (p. 3)

Scalapino's is a landscape of extreme dislocation: the speaker keeps trying to get her bearings, define her place in relation to the "buildings . . . at the far end" (of what?), but her definitions and explanations keep breaking down. The recurrent units of her discourse are personal pronouns—*they, them, we*—that have no referents, and impersonal nouns followed by relative clauses that fail to specify: *the man who, the man in the car, the person who, the other person*. There are also multiple references to *where* and *there*, to *the area* (again unspecified), to cars, busses, taxis, and trams, an industrial park, a vacant lot, a "run-down setting." There is also "desire" between "him and me" (p. 5) or "Not being between him and me but with him desiring."

Scalapino's narrator repeatedly begins to tell a story, as in the opening sentence above, but the narrative trails off in a network of meaningless explanations. It does no good, for example, to know that "they were in a different place" when we don't know who "they" are. Again, the relationship of "I work" to the "work" of those "others" like the "delivery driver" who has come to the vacant area, an area that "didn't have any shade or people," remains unclear. Repeatedly, the "I" tries to locate herself to that which is "Behind me," "between the buildings and the bus," "before the train station." She situates herself "in the foreground, with many people living in the area immediately behind me" (p. 11), only to sense that in relation to the "kids on bicycles . . . still in an area ahead of me," it is she who is in the background. Foreground/background, new/old, is/isn't, someone/no one—the dialectic of Scalapino's repetitions, drawn from a highly restricted vocabulary, culminates in the



admission that "I don't know how old the man is, who's old," and finally, in the minimal unit of the last page:

*They're not the same people.*

*(So they're seen, and not active)*

where the "and" connects two adjectivals that have no relationship to one another. And it is this unrelatedness of life in the modern city, the failure of its settings and its daily "events" to come together, that is Scalapino's subject.

The final section of "buildings are at the far end" cited above is lineated, rather than printed as prose. Scalapino sometimes presents a sequence as prose (as in "that they were at the beach—aeolotropic series"), sometimes in verse ("chameleon series"), but, in either case, rhythmic identity depends upon the carefully controlled repetition of highly selected, condensed verbal units, upon interruption and resumption, as if we were listening to a slightly staticky radio. A related form of poetic prose, but one that relies much more fully on complex patterns of sound repetition, is found in Ron Silliman's *Paradise*.

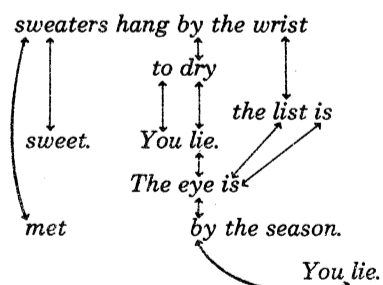
"The problem which confronts any writer," Silliman remarked in a recent interview, "once they have broken with the received tradition of a writing that presumes and imposes a stable 'voice,' is how literally to proceed. Without persona, narrative or argument (however implicit or associational), what motivates the next line, the next sentence, the next paragraph or stanza? Without syntax, what justifies the existence of even the next word?"<sup>6</sup> What Silliman has in mind here is the contemporary predilection for a "free verse" that has, in fact, no rationale beyond the vague notion that "poetry" somehow demands lineation. At the same time, he does not want to return to what he calls "the closed form" of the sonnet, the heroic couplet, the ballad stanza, and so on. Silliman's own solution, derived from poets like Jackson Mac Low, is to use some sort of number base or permutation pattern as a generative procedure, generative in the sense that it forces the poem to take a direction at odds with the debased coinage of a language that is increasingly the creature of the media industries. "The words," as he puts it, "are never our own. Rather they are our own usages of a determinate coding passed down to us like all other products of civilization, organized into a single, capitalist, world economy."<sup>7</sup>

I dislike the word "capitalist" here, implying, as it does, that in the alternative modern "socialist" world economy there is no "determinate coding" of the linguistic field. Khlebnikov, for one, knew better. In any case, the main point here is that "all meaning is a construct, built from the determinate code of language." If indeed "our words are never our own," it is the poet's task to make them new. Khlebnikov's call for *slovo kak takovoe* ("the word as such") is surely apposite to *Paradise* which opens as follows:

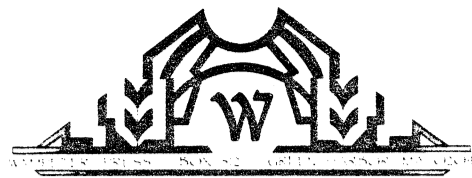
Words slip, does type, hand around the pen a clamp, a clip. Visible breath against constructivist past. The shed crowded, write in a sweat. We celebrate the agreement of a new year, the head shrouded, bright in a knit suit. Loop conceived in a line, the spine with its regions, reasons. On another, sweaters hang by the wrist to dry. The list is sweet. You lie. The eye is met by the season. (p. 9)

Silliman's signature, both here and elsewhere, is a startling fusion of invocative *sounding*, a kind of *zaum* language one can read against the "primitive" chants and spells in *Technicians of the Sacred*, with a common-sense dailiness that relates the reader's world to the poet's. Like *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*, *Paradise* has its base in the ordinary reality of daily routine, a routine in which "sweaters hang by the wrist [on the clothesline] to dry," knit suits are worn to work, lists are drawn up, and New Year's resolutions made.

At the same time, the poet's deconstruction of this familiar domesticity is radical. Like a popular song, Silliman's paragraph exploits all the resources of rhyming—*slip/clip*; *crowded/shrouded*, *line/spine*; *regions/reasons*, *season*; *wrist/list*; *by*, *dry/lie/eye*—and the consonance of voiceless stops, as in *slip*, *clamp*, *clip*; and in *against*, *constructivist*, *past*, *write*, *sweat*—so as to create an extraordinarily dense sound structure. Consider the following chimings:

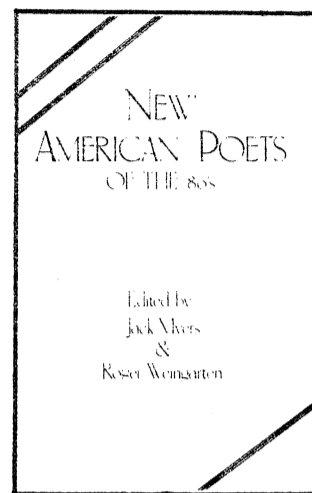


Yet, as even this diagram shows, there is no regular metrical pattern, no measurable phonemic recurrence in the passage. On the contrary, the sound repetitions are, so to speak, buried in the sequence of sentences which, by definition, propel the reader forward to the end of the paragraph. Indeed, the figure of sound is called into question by the network of references in the passage. First, the ironic allusion to Eliot's "Burnt Norton": "Words strain,/Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,/Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,/Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/Will not stay still." For Silliman, the slippage, decried by Eliot, is a necessary thing. Indeed we witness it occurring:



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"Words slip, does type, hand around the pen, a clamp, a clip" is not a coherent grammatical unit. Should we insert a conjunction after "slip" and read it as "Words slip, so does type"? But if the typewriter is also there, why is the "hand around the pen"? The second sentence refuses to respond to the first, measuring the poet's "Visible breath" against a "past" he had hoped to be "constructivist," or again, in another literary allusion, relates it to the "constructivist" past of the Russian avant-garde. As Charles Bernstein has remarked, one of Silliman's central themes is "the desire to read in a unity even where none exists"; accordingly, his particulars don't add up: "every new sentence [is] a new embarkation. . . . A has a relation to B and B to C, but A and C have nothing in common (*series not essence*)."

In the verbal world of *Paradise*, clichés are regularly introduced and then deflated. The Romantic poet naturally "write[s] in a sweat," but here the infinitive phrase "write in a sweat" is left subjectless and is placed in non-grammatical apposition with "The shed is crowded." Or again, the "head shrouded" (with a crown or laurel wreath?) here appears in conjunction with a knit suit. The heart, as Pascal told us, has its reasons, but here the "spine" has "its regions,/reasons." Thus the possibility of making a mental "Loop" leads us no further than the line on which the sweaters hang to dry. *Line—list—you lie*. Perhaps the "list" is not sweet after all. The eye, in any case, "is met by the season." It is time to face the new day. "Dawn's crack," as we learn from the second paragraph, "invades dark at the horizon, somersaults underwater, duress."

The terrain laid out in the first paragraph of *Paradise* now becomes the occasion for a complex series of variations and permutations. Domestic paraphernalia—spoons, cereal bowls, crackers, ironing boards, dryers—float in and out of sight, caught in a web of narrative fragments, memories, meditations. "As *USA Today* makes clear," we read in the third section, "condensare is not itself sufficient for dichtung" (p. 20). Pound's "Dichten=condensare" that is to say, is no longer the poetic norm; rather, "The shape of the alphabet is itself a system" to be explored, interpreted, elaborated. Given the demise of the "unitary I" as focal point, the very act of naming generates structure. "O venerable atrophy, apostrophe, catastrophe," we read on page 30, the "beyonsense" permutations generating a sequence in which the "Cat" of "catastrophe" "crouches beneath the lawn chair" and "Shadows" (an anagram for the first three a-o units) "shape the light."

"When words are, meaning soon follows." So Ron Silliman in an early issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*,<sup>9</sup> thus echoing Khlebnikov's insistence that the poet is primarily a "word-worker," one who "remains face to face, always and ultimately, with the word (itself) alone." In the spirit of Khlebnikov, poets like Silliman and Scalapino present themselves, not

as the purveyors of "private" insights, psychological truths, or unique confessions, but as what Rothenberg so advisedly calls *technicians* of the sacred. "The value of sound," we read in *Paradise*, "is that it's outside the rational." ■

### Notes

1. This summary is based on material in the Introduction and Headnotes of *The King of Time*, as well as on the chronology in Velimir Khlebnikov, *Snake Train: Poetry & Prose*, ed. Gary Kern; translated by Gary Kern et. al. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976), pp. 267-72. This text is subsequently cited as ST.
2. Roman Jakobson, "Retrospect" (1961), in *Selected Writings*, Volume I, 2d Revised Edition (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 632-33.
3. "Stray Straws and Straw Men," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 42. This text is subsequently cited as LB.
4. "Restorative Topographies: Notes on Ethnopoetics from a Province of the Mind," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 11 (Fall/Winter 1983, Spring/Summer, 1984): 271.
5. See, for example, Henry M. Sayre, "David Antin and the Oral Poetics Movement," *Contemporary Literature*, 23 (Fall 1982): 428-450.
6. Ron Silliman, "An Interview with Tom Beckett," in *The Difficulties*, 2, no. 2: Ron Silliman Issue (1985): 34. This text is subsequently cited as DIRS.
7. "If by 'Writing' We Mean Literature," LB, pp. 167-168.
8. "NARRATING NARRATION: The Shapes of Ron Silliman's Work," DIRS: 93.
9. "For L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E," LB, p. 16.

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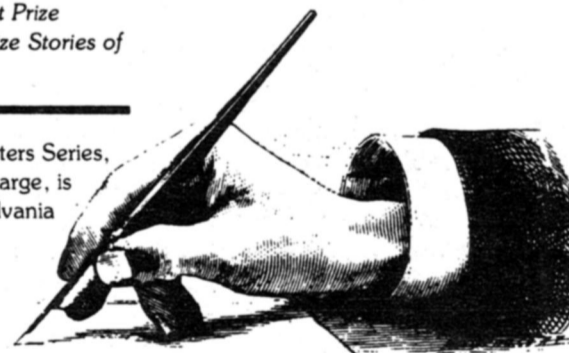
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