

University of Pennsylvania

Bob Perelman

### *The New and its Reproductive Practices*

*This paper was delivered on 29 November 2003 as the Keynote Address at Negotiations: Writing, the Academy and Publishing, the Eighth Annual conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 27-30 November 2003.*

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to 'The New and its Reproductive Practices'. I begin this way because, coming to Australia for the first time, I was struck by how this unfamiliar expression, spoken without irony apparently, could be used to grab hold of some basic problems embedded in the teaching of writing. Are we as teachers put willy-nilly in the role of 'ladies and gentlemen' who are addressing students from an unavoidable position of power, making them willy-nilly 'boys and girls'? There's the obvious but unmentionable fact that 'ladies and gentlemen' reproduce, with the eternally interesting corollary that they don't reproduce themselves, but rather produce 'boys and girls'. The analogy is tricky, and woe to the teacher and student who mistake the relation between them as parental. But some sort of generational reproduction, production and mutation is going on in teaching situations: teachers, students; writing, reading; novelty, repetition. Old writing can be taught and learned; new writing can be learned but not taught; old writing can teach new reading; good teaching can teach bad reading. Bad teaching can produce good writers. Plus the reverse of all these. In this talk the notion of the avant-garde will continually obtrude in the midst of such swirls although it will hardly be a fixed point of reference. Sometimes I'll describe it as an evanescent delusion, sometimes as a centuries-old tradition established with surprising firmness. Often I'll sidestep the fussy provenance of the term, which some say should only apply to Dada and Surrealism in the early 20th Century, and simply use the vaguest and slipperiest of all adjectives, 'new'. My basic question will be: Is the new always what will turn out to have the greatest value in writing? Such equations are inflammatory - who says what's new, who says what's good? And even if we provisionally assume that the new is the good or is the best index of the good, how can it factor into the regimes of Creative Writing or of literary study? Isn't teaching by definition one, two, or a hundred steps behind the new? You may not agree with that. But the new does fit awkwardly into the actual, bureaucratic-inertial, market-tormented pedagogic situations that we find ourselves in, though it plays a larger role in the imagined pedagogic situations we might like to create. I want to agitate these questions productively, though I won't pretend to answer them. Along the way I will discuss the following: the structures of Creative Writing and of literary study and the possibility of building a bridge between them; the proper punctuation of 'poet critic', the antithetical concepts orthodoxy and orthopraxis, the possibility that Ern

Malley is the ideal Creative Writing student; a narrative of the trouble the new has in staying new; and, finally, one of my poems.

To conclude my introductory remarks I'll cite another striking Australian speech act, this one by Paul Dawson yesterday: 'We're all bored shitless by the old question of whether or not writing can be taught.' It *is* a boring question, but not, I think, because it has been answered long before now. Paul, forgive me for elaborating like this on what was after all a throwaway comment, but I suppose I find 'bored shitless' compelling because it is a close cousin to the self-deconstructing feeling that comes over me when my lives as a writer and a teacher of writing align awkwardly. In those times, *I'm* not sure that writing as I experience it can be taught, or at least that I can teach it. I'll read a bit from the middle of my poem, 'A Body', which will clarify what I mean. I'll pick it up at a moment which treats poetry, quite ironically, as a valuable art-commodity such as an Impressionist painting. The next lines begin in similarly ironic fashion, but suddenly turn things upside down into a highly serious and slightly campy lyrical evocation of Shelleyan poetic transcendence. The phrase 'intense inane' comes from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, which I was teaching at the time I wrote the poem. This outburst of lyric theory ends with 'syntax exhibitionists' and 'weather fetishists', which I then deflate by mentioning school. Again, this can be heard as irony, but I think it is also quite honestly saying that I learned to write, very indirectly to be sure, in school. Thus, to anticipate a phrase you'll hear in the excerpt, all my poetic truths are second-generation truths. No originality. A few more comments: the first use of 'cruellest' is misspelled with only one 'l'; and 'skyey' is another Shelleyism; the penis quote is from Freud's paper on Fetishism; there are many other detoured poetic quotes.

... A poem should offer steady  
increases in meaning for the foreseeable  
future; it could skyrocket like Impressionism  
in the eighties. Poetry is a  
pyramid scheme, an inverted one,  
whose point flickers as I breathe,  
and whose base is pinnacled, so  
to speak, in the sky - technically  
speaking, in the intense inane:  
the concentrated vacuum of linguistic openness.  
From that utopia, in ways invisible  
to the present, the roofless malls  
of a biomorphic future earth will  
descend, offering test-sites for syntax exhibitionists  
and narrative flashpoints for weather fetishists  
- at least that's what I was  
taught in school: April is the  
cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of  
the dead land, mixing memory and

desire. I remember sitting in front  
of rectangular walls and pages, occasionally

identifying with the revealed meanings but  
more often losing myself in the

distances. I learned that there are  
two *l*'s in *cruellest*, neither one

the same; two *e*'s; an *r*,  
a *u*, an *s*, a *c*;

and a *t*: some of the  
more evocative letters in our arsenal

of weaned sound, endlessly murmuring their  
2<sup>nd</sup> generation truths. The same lives

and difference kills and names it,  
that's how history continues pronouncing this.

The woman still has a penis,  
but this penis is no longer

the same penis. Something else has,  
so to speak, been appointed its

successor. The rise of the intellectual  
fits in here, but nobody can

say exactly where without the exactitude  
being guaranteed institutionally, which then generates

the problem of an institution to  
report home to, be in bed

with, however chastely, and to rise  
above in dreams. In the focused

but hypnotic specificity of the self  
the setting might involve the dark

tents of innumerable students surrounding an  
illuminated opera house, a nipple of

light commanded by the heights of  
the dream vantage. Inside, the audience's

employment is sacrificed on performance night  
for the salvation of the professionals.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
and what I assume you shall

assume: a world, whose collective eyes,  
tuned to mutually provocative codes of

pleasure, drop tears as fast as  
the Arabian trees their med'cinable petroleum.

Set you down this, and don't  
forget to specify the funding lines

to guarantee both the kinks and  
the articulation of the culture rubdowns

that will, as you say, somehow  
or other generate those skyey malls

I'm sure we're all anxious to  
check out just as soon as

they're up and running. But now,  
when we squint upwards, bright bands

of UV fall from the air,  
irradiating the spectrum and making national

colors glow fiercely. What rough beast,  
its hour come round at last,

slouches toward Jerusalem to be born?  
Poetry has been moved to aisle

12, between the get-well cards and  
the pantyhose... (1)

## **The Pedagogic Structures of Creative Writing and of Literary Study**

Creative Writing has achieved the status of a professional discipline, at least in the eyes of university administrators. Those eyes might not light up with pleasure and respect at the thought of it, but funds are authorized so that salaries can be paid, florescent lights, toner, and chalk can be purchased. And once a critical mass of chalk, toner, florescent lighting and paychecks has been reached, conferences like this occur. It may or may not have a coherent intellectual structure, but Creative Writing does by now have a history and an increasing presence in university curricula. And there is strong student demand for it, something that always makes administrative eyes light up.

In the USA it is the rare university where literary criticism is not at odds with Creative Writing. The hundreds of university Creative Writing programs there, are almost without exception places where hostility to theory, to intellectual approaches to literature, and to innovative writing are the rule. During my formative years in the Language Writing scene in the 70s, it was a matter of course to attack the aura-driven, faux-charismatic, unambitious poetry coming out of writing workshops. I've gotten the impression that things are not quite the same here. Creative Writing programs seem more open to theory and to innovative writing; though I also get the impression that things are not totally different and that something of the same stand-off between English Departments and Creative Writing programs occurs here as well. In America, many professors feel that the Creative Writing teacher has a great scam going. On Monday the English professor taught 'Lycidas' and discussed pastoral elegy, Moschus, and why 'pastures new' enrolled Milton in Virgil's

trajectory of eclogue, georgic, and epic, the classic career shape of the major poet. Wednesday the syllabus dictates the first book of *Paradise Lost*; thus the English professor has to find some time Tuesday night to review Empson's *Milton's God* and Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin*. But the Creative Writing teacher's class only meets on Fridays, and since there will in all probability only be time to workshop three student poems before the break and two after it, the teacher only has to read five student poems to prepare for class. The students are supposed to have read each other's poems carefully and to have prepared comments on them, but since any poem being workshopped will be read aloud in class first, they know that they don't have to do anything at all before showing up in class. The Creative Writing teacher is aware of this strategy as well, and will take advantage of it if Thursday night is not conducive to class preparation.

Thus, in terms of structure and content, the English professor has reason to disdain Creative Writing. Aren't Aristotle's *Poetics*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Auerbach's *Mimesis* more intellectually compelling than, say, Kenneth Koch's *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Isn't 'Sailing to Byzantium' a more notable object to spend a class period on than the first 15 lines of free verse that an 18-year-old student has ever written? Nevertheless, no small part of the professor's disdain toward Creative Writing can be ascribed to the narcissism of small differences. Literary criticism has a richer history than Creative Writing; but 'richer history' doesn't necessarily translate to 'more coherent structure'. Viewed pessimistically - some would say realistically - the history of literary criticism can be seen as no more than a succession of changing fashions of scholia. At the beginning of *Anatomy of Criticism* (2), Northrop Frye observes that if literary criticism isn't producing something as 'coherent and progressive as the study of science' (10-11), then most literary scholarship in the academy is 'merely an automatic method of acquiring merit, like turning a prayer wheel' (11). (These days, as all too many English professors know, the publication wheel is far from automatic in its revolutions.) One of Frye's initial premises is that literature cannot be taught: one doesn't "'learn literature'", he writes, 'what one learns, transitively, is the criticism of literature. Similarly, the difficulty often felt in "teaching literature" arises from the fact that it cannot be done: the criticism of literature is all that can be taught.' *Anatomy of Criticism* did attempt to produce a coherent and progressive structure, but of course its attempt at structure is no longer in fashion. Thus, can't it be said that the teaching of literary criticism amounts to little more than an attempt to inculcate students in its current fashions? Where the Chemistry professor in effect is saying, Here is the periodic table, and here are the steps by which you will learn its structure and ramifications, the English professor is saying, I read, and in this class I will help you to read. And isn't that what also happens in Creative Writing: I write, and in this class I will help you to write? Crowning the bitterness of criticism's narcissism of small differences is that Creative Writing is more popular with students. As a pedagogical subject, literature has more prestige, but it is residual prestige - possibly like the classics in Great Britain in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, though that may be too pessimistic a comparison. Still, in the quasi-market of the university, Creative Writing is the growth industry. In the United States recently, the governor of Kentucky, lobbying to cut funds for higher education, dismissed the activities of English professors with the observation that all they do is 'write pointy-headed articles for itty-bitty journals.'

The governor was speaking from the long and glorious tradition of American Know-Nothingism, which is all too alive and well in the States.

I think you have your own strain of it here. I may have the phrasing wrong, but I believe it's something like the Tall Poppy Syndrome, an active vigilance against anything out of the ordinary. While the complaints that students don't read, that they come from homes without any books, that music and images on screens are the only media they accept, are not unrealistic, an even more potent enemy of all kinds of verbal pedagogy is such Tall Poppy vigilance, the revulsive reflex that greets any new word or novel combination of words. If it were simply a matter of deprivation, the teacher of literature or of Creative Writing would be welcomed like a person arriving in a subsistence outpost with a wagonload of goods. And it is one of the most gratifying classroom scenarios to have the students happily receptive to all the depth and variety of your knowledge and eager to learn more. We all, I hope, have had the good fortune to encounter such students. But they do not make up the whole of the classroom population, and it's that armor that many students instantaneously deploy against all violations of prescribed codes that makes teaching so frustrating and can turn the classroom into a blurry, cynical version of the avant-garde rhetorical situation: 'You don't like this? You don't get this? Well, here's something weirder to hold an even sharper mirror up to your hideously placid narcissism.' Perhaps the happy few among you have never experienced such moments.

Self-deconstruction can be distorting, like when the protagonist of *Confessions of Zeno* learns that there are 42 muscles involved in taking a step and then limps through the last two-thirds of the book. There may be no objectively rigorous subjects in either literature or in Creative Writing classes whose structure can be abstracted from the contexts of teaching; nevertheless, in both venues teaching and learning do occur, often very successfully. Teaching in either discipline takes work, tact, willingness to try many frames and approaches; it's a pragmatic enterprise. It is shot through with complexes of ideas; but these ideas have little independent existence: they need to be grasped and activated by the students, and this activation modifies them. In the best-case scenarios, it's not that teachers emerge from the class knowing less than they did at the beginning, rather, that what they know is different than it was when the term began.

This remains a profoundly troubling reflection for many teachers since it valorizes a weakly democratic regime where the teacher's knowledge and expertise count for less than the students' initial states of preparation.

I began by setting the diligent English professor against the Creative Writing teacher who was a total slacker. But we can tilt the playing field in the other direction as well. 'Lycidas' and the history of pastoral elegy will be accepted by the English major, but will be of little use in reaching the general student. For these students, who after all are the large majority, Creative Writing is a more directly effective approach. If a student can be induced to *write* something new, then they may later begin to get interested in reading something new. By validating their own activation of writing, Creative Writing can get them to loosen or shed their own armor.

### **Connecting English 88 to English 118**

Next semester I will be teaching English 88, American Poetry from Whitman, Dickinson, and Dunbar to the Present, and English 118, Advanced Poetry Workshop. Logically, a student should take poetry survey before the workshop. How can you write without a vocabulary of poetic gestures? Then again, students who have written poetry are always

better equipped to read unfamiliar poetry than other students. So the workshop should be a prerequisite for the poetry survey.

The literary field is inescapably jumbled up historically - William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* from 1923 is brand new for most students semester after semester. But sequence is constitutive of pedagogy. The thought of teaching a literature syllabus in chronological reverse always intrigues me: to start with what is most known to the students, the present, and build backwards toward the unfamiliar past. Isn't that what Creative Writing does? It starts in the present, although the trajectory is not toward the past; the goal is to build toward a future that doesn't reproduce the present

### **Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis**

But the familiar, unliterary present has powerful inertia. If we think of writing as a commercial product, then it's a buyer's market, where we often have to spend most of our time attracting the consumer. As a reminder that things can be otherwise, here is an example of a seller's market: the acolyte tries and tries to have the Zen master accept him, waits outside the snowy mountain cave for days and days, but the master consistently tells him to go away. There's more drama to the story, which I don't remember. All that remains for me is the final detail, the act by which the acolyte succeeds in being accepted: he cuts off his arm and presents it to the master.

Talk about prerequisites! That acolyte's violence was an example of orthopraxis, which is a term I take from Mary Carruthers's *The Craft of Thought*:

Orthopraxis is a category developed for the comparative study of religions, specifically Christianity and Buddhism. Orthodox believers seek...to reproduce the experience of learning from the teacher, whose teaching lives on in authentic texts, verbal traditions or creeds. An orthopractic adept, by contrast, seeks to achieve an immanent experience of the divine equivalent to that of the founder, usually by following a devotional practice presumed to be similar. Orthodoxy explicates canonical texts, where orthopraxis emphasizes a set of experiences and techniques... Because it seeks an experience, an orthopraxis can never be completely articulate... Orthopraxis is a concept not unique to religion. (3)

Isn't innovative poetry permanently orthopractic, challenging prior poetic orthodoxies? Or has that orthopractic challenge become an orthodoxy?

### **Ern Malley the Ideal Creative Writing Student**

Pop quiz: 'Ern Malley is the ideal CW student.' Discuss.

### **CULTURE AS EXHIBIT**

Swamps, marshes, borrow-pits and other  
Areas of stagnant water serve

As breeding-grounds... Now  
 Have I found you, my Anopheles!  
 (There is a meaning for the circumspect)

Come, we will dance sedate quadrilles,  
 A pallid polka or a yelping shimmy  
 Over the sunken sodden breeding-grounds!  
 We will be wraiths and wreaths of tissue-paper  
 To clog the Town Council in their plans.  
 Culture forsooth! Albert, get my gun.

I have been noted in the reading-rooms  
 As a borer of calf-bound volumes  
 Full of scandals at the Court. (Milord  
 Had his hand upon that snowy globe  
 Milady Lucy's sinister breast...) Attendants  
 Have peered me over while I chewed  
 Back-numbers of Florentine gazettes  
 (Knowst not, my Lucia, that he  
 Who has caparisoned a nun dies  
 With his twanky-dillo at the ready?...)   
 But in all of this I got no culture till  
 I read a little pamphlet on my thighs  
 Entitled: *Friction as a Social Process*.  
 What? Look, my Anopheles,  
 See how the floor of Heav'n  
 Inlaid with patines of etcetera...  
 Sting them, sting them, my Anopheles. (4)

Here, McAuley and Stewart exhibited quite a high level of familiarity with the latest literary developments. They identified actively (if only for 8 hours) with the position of avant-garde provocateur. They broke out of the mold of jejune self-centeredness by collaborating. Despite the fact that their attitude seems to have been scorn of the new and thus common sense might say that they were acting on behalf of literary orthodoxy, wasn't the activity of Malley orthopractic, nevertheless? 'Pound, Eliot and Breton seem to throw together all sorts of crap without serious thought,' said Ern, 'I too will throw together all sorts of crap without serious thought.'

### **The Proper Punctuation of 'Poet Critic'**

Slashes vs. Hyphens. At times I identify myself as a poet/critic, at other times a poet-critic. A hyphen suggests an amalgamation of the two disciplines; a slash keeps them separate, poetry staying on its side of the fence and criticism on its side. The poet/critic wears two hats (or has two heads); the poet-critic wears a single hat, but is it advanced or just a hybrid grotesquerie like the construction that Flaubert places on top of Charles Bovary's head at the start of the novel. In the hyphen moments, when I want to join the two, I think that criticism should work like poetry in its unfixed, exacting, historically nuanced use of word, sound and sentence, in its emotional sophistication and resistance to institutional routines and gravity; and then that poetry should work like criticism in its awareness of others, its sensitivity to the mixed conditions of many other minds in the present, minds that don't necessarily find the verbal universe to be a reassuring playground.

But I have to admit to many periods of unease about the unifying hyphen, which can suggest a lonely triumphalism, i.e. narcissism. I can feel, and feel quite strongly, that poetry is scattered throughout all cultural signifying practices. This is an old and frequently made observation. Shelley makes it in his *Defence of Poetry*; Roman Jakobson's essay analyzing the poetics of the slogan 'I Like Ike' provides a cogent logical demonstration. Charles Bernstein writes, in 'What's Art Got To Do With It' (in the same book that contains the essay 'The Revenge of the Poet-Critic' with a hyphen (5)), 'The poetic is not confined to poetry but rather is embedded in all our activities as critics, teachers, researchers, and writers, not to mention citizens. When we use figurative language, which is just about whenever we use language at all, we are entangled in the poetic realm' (43).

But then again, students aren't automatically aware of this. Shelley's 'Defence' confuses many; or, more simply, they just don't buy it. 'Architecture is poetry, law is poetry, textile manufacture is poetry - fine. But that doesn't make me like poetry any better.' Many students would be happier if poetry was poetry, and criticism was criticism. The case is no easier when it comes to prose. The joke is 300 years old. In *The Bourgeois Gentleman* M. Jourdain wants the pedantic Philosophy Master to write a letter for him. Does he want it in verse or prose? What's 'prose'? Whatever isn't verse. The punch line - that the bourgeois M. Jourdain, aspiring to the status of gentleman without the requisite social capital, has unwittingly been speaking prose all his life - still circulates. 'Moliere's bourgeois gentleman discovered he'd been "speaking prose" for forty years, without knowing it; has clinical social work theory been *cutting edge* without knowing it?' (6) Nor is the Philosophy Master's distinction completely outmoded: as a last-ditch definition prose and poetry are whatever the other isn't. Moliere's deft humor remains apropos: while the pedant is simply foolish, M. Jourdain's confusion pinpoints a crucial question. He takes pride in his sudden intimacy with prose, but he's not sure whether it's a universal ability or whether he's special.

Finding that's one's subject has universal application is refreshing, as when Frank O'Hara uses popular culture as his criterion of judgment, writing in 'Personism' that in American poetry only Whitman, Crane and Williams are better than the movies; but then again it's refreshing to give up trying to force universality down everyone's throats: as O'Hara writes in the same piece: 'If people don't need poetry, bully for them' (498). (7)

### **The Trouble with Innovation**

A fable: When it comes to innovative writing, the present, the cumbersome obvious present, plays the most uncanny trick on the new:

After a period of coalescence, the new emerges into the present. There must have been some fortunate hours or it wouldn't have emerged at all. But the hours were fortunate and the new does emerge, energetically. Having done so, it fortifies its identity by focusing its aim, which is to progress directly and unambiguously toward the future. It streamlines its modes to get there more quickly and to separate itself from its compromised, conservative, mildewed rivals. After intense stretches of invention, self-presentation, polemic, self-correction, gathering articulation and further invention all happening more or less

simultaneously, a time comes to take stock of how far it has progressed.

Now the present is no nimble magician; there is no sudden revelation from behind a flashing cape. But it happens every time: the new has not reached the future: for all its ferocious velocity it finds itself stuck fast in the past. Nostalgia becomes an occupational hazard at this point...

While that is something of a true story it is also a deadpan schematization that exaggerates the inefficacy of the new by isolating the temporal dimension of writing. New writing always becomes old writing, the shock of avant-garde Dada in WWI Zurich leaves behind a few posters and collages which fetch high prices in auction houses seven decades later; and what looked like the mentally deranged typography of ZANG TUUM TUUM is reproduced with exacting solicitude in an anthology of innovative writing. Paul Mann, in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (8) traces such cycles from cataclysmic rupture to routinized critical practice with grim determination which takes away all hope of the avant-garde ever staying ahead of anything. As I will say in thumbnail form a little later in this talk, If the new reproduces it's not new.

But the paradoxes involved in the notion of an avant-garde tradition are foundational to any attempt to teach experimental writing. Despite the strictures of theorists like Mann and Peter Bürger, (9) it is quite possible to discern something very like an avant-garde tradition stretching back for at least a century. Counter-institutions are now in place, allowing the avant-garde work to circulate far beyond any original groups or coteries: criticism on Gertrude Stein is easy to find; Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' appears on many a syllabus; the influence of Susan Howe and Leslie Scalapino is pervasive in some new poetry magazines.

For Creative Writing and for literary study, the present facts of contemporary writing, outside the classroom, have the function of a necessary avant-garde or whatever you want to call it, towards which pedagogy should strive.

### **The New and its Reproductive Practices**

If time is a one-way, irreversible continuum the past will always resolve into a receding vista of periodizing terms: Post-Language, Language Writing, New American Poetry, Objectivism, High Modernism, Romanticism. For some, the Avant-Garde is visible right behind High Modernism; others, though, place it in front; others see it everywhere; still others don't see it at all. Many reproductions of the vista are sold each year; most omit the Avant-Garde. All versions of the view ironize vanguard aspirations; iconoclasm always becomes 'The New is Dead, Long Live the New!' a salute to the unchanging reign of Continuity.

The partisans' place in the synchronous literary field is embattled; but our temporal claims are secure. Breathing space in the present may be circumscribed, but the present opens securely onto the future; and the past is under control as well. It can be destroyed as with the Futurists, or shaped by definition and identification. A list of some representative stances: Stendhal enlists past writers into his partisan fight for an emergent Romanticism: 'Molière was romantic in 1670, because the court was full of Orontes and the châteaux in the provinces were full of very discontented

Alcestes. Actually, ALL GREAT WRITERS WERE THE ROMANTICS OF THEIR DAY' (145). (10) Baudelaire sets up a two-state solution, granting autonomy to both the present and eternity: 'By "modernity" I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable' (497). (11) Zukofsky's capsule poetics in 'A'-6 unites the past; an observed, multiform present; and the future as he asks for writing that is 'objectively perfect / Inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars' (24). (12) The salient aspect of this formula is the assertion of control: the art work is objectively perfect and coincides exactly with the direction of history. In this, Zukofsky is quite like Eliot: 'The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.' In asserting his power to enter and to change the past ideal order, Eliot idealizes his own power under the name of the new; Zukofsky's claim of perfection does the same, although the power is put in history's name.

It's awkward to yoke Eliot with Zukofsky or with any partisans of innovation. The strain is evident in the single word 'monuments' Eliot uses to designate literary works. This gesture of proto-institutionalization anticipates his full conversion to exaggerated respectability and assiduous genuflection to the triumphant theologic literariness he invented. He never acknowledged the invention nor the triumph, instead acting out a pious self-extinction in the service of tradition: 'We shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity' (5, 4). (13) To reach full maturity is also to enlist in the ranks of the dead. As for mere living, that's for 'impressionable adolescence.'

If Eliot's dead ventriloquizing poets are subtracted, the 1988 quasi-manifesto by six Language Writers makes a claim on tradition that is structurally similar to Eliot's in one way. For us the avant-garde tradition was as crucial and established a fact as Eliot's tradition. Language Writing's emergence was not 'an unusual narrative. Developments of such collective activity have characterized the history of the avant-garde' such as 'the Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, and New York schools of poetry.' In a move that, again, has surprising similarities to Eliot, we assumed a position of normative maturity as we called those who repressed or were ignorant of our tradition parochial: 'On analogy with the visual arts, where the "avant-garde" is felt to be a virtual commonplace, the situation of poetry is as if the entire history of radical modernism...had been replaced by a league of suburban landscape painters' (261, 2). Unlike Eliot, we emphasized community: our basic principle was 'not the "self-sufficiency of language" or the "materiality of the sign" *but the reciprocity of practice implied by a community of writers who read each other's work*' (271). (14) But it was our community, defined solely by the activity of reading and writing, temporarily free from larger social striations and antagonisms.

The general pattern, where power over history is wielded to solidify an embattled position in the present literary field, is maintained in Steve Evans's recent online castigation of the journal *Fence*. (15) The ferocity of the charge of apostasy against the avant-garde is clear from the title, 'The Resistible Rise of Fence Enterprises': change 'Fence Enterprises' to 'Arturo Ui' and you have Brecht's allegory of Hitler's rise. Evans draws a fiery line between the avant-garde and writing that is merely 'linguistically

innovative,' or 'experimental'. The avant-garde is distinguished less by any formal distinctions than by its sociality; it is 'collective and contentious'; its core values are 'solidarity, integrity and generosity'. But without the 'imaginative work of connecting [its] expressions back to the social forces, contradictions, and struggles that animate contemporary life', the avant-garde falls into 'formalism'. This is the fate of *Fence*, which supports, for Evans, merely a 'facile pluralism,' selectively appropriating 'radical poetic techniques, shorn of their contexts and motivating commitments'. Borrowing Adorno's description of compromised atonal composers, Evans predicts that such a 'despicable artistic credo' will only produce 'a respectably routinized neo-academicism'; 'self-flattery' that mistakes 'linguistic for social structures', it has no future and is merely a 'spent poetics...the radical imagination has already left...behind'. Because it is not avant-garde, *Fence* is expelled from history.

My section heading promised an account of reproductive practices, but there's been precious little in evidence. If it occurs at all, reproduction occurs, not in the secure realm of history, but in the embattled social spaces of the present, with the inevitable danger of becoming reproducible, routine doxa, some 'respectably routinized neo-academicism'. If the new reproduces it's not new. Existence itself, if continued, problematic: how can extending across the temporal boundary of the present moment be distinguished from extending across spatial, institutional boundaries that separate a *Fence* magazine from the genuine avant-garde? If the continuous and the contiguous aren't destroyed, fenced off, ignored, they will dissolve the avant-garde community. Controlling extension is fundamental to avant-garde self-fashioning.

But extending the circulation of new writing is fundamental to teaching. So here my attempts to zigzag back and forth between avant-garde and new meet heavy weather.

The drive for innovation, coupled with the claim that it is by definition politically efficacious, continues the momentum of a basic modernist legacy which innovative poets and critics have been living and writing under for close to a century. Under the dispensation of this legacy the news and the new have been synonymous, both nouns standing for the central value organizing all battles for poetic position. 'Make It New' describes the impulse governing significant writing. How to determine what is significant? 'Literature is news that STAYS news.' In other words, the new is news that stays news. Inside this circle the problem of poetry's social authority is solved: poetic knowledge ceases to be merely specialized; heterodox poetry is united with universal history. But this only works for the partisans of the new; it makes little sense in the classroom.

## Confession

Aliens have inhabited my aesthetics for  
decades. Really since the early 70s.

Before that I pretty much wrote  
as myself, though young. But something

has happened to my memory, my  
judgment: apparently, my will has been

affected. That old stuff, the fork  
in the head, first home run,

Dad falling out of the car  
- I remember the words, but I

can't get back there anymore. I  
think they must be screening my

sensations. I'm sure my categories have  
been messed with. I look at

the poetry anthologies in the big  
chains and campus bookstores, even the

books in the small press opium  
dens, all those stanzas against that

white space - the poems just look  
like the models in the catalogs.

The models have arms and legs  
and a head, the poems mostly

don't, but other than that it's  
hard - for me anyway - to tell

them apart. There's the sexy underwear  
poem, the sturdy workboot poem you

could wear to a party in  
a pinch, the little blaspheming dress

poem. There's variety, you say: the  
button-down oxford with offrhymed cuffs. The

epic toga, showing some ancient ankle,  
the behold! the world is changed

and finally I'm normal flowing robe  
and shorts, the full nude, the

scatter - Yes, I suppose there's variety,  
but the looks, those come on

and read me for the inner  
you I've locked onto with my

cultural capital sensing device looks! No  
thanks, Jay Peterman! No thanks, 'Ordinary

Evening in New Haven!'! I'm just  
waiting for my return ticket to

have any meaning, for those saucer-shaped  
clouds to lower! The authorities deny

any visitations - no surprise. And I  
myself deny them - think about it.

What could motivate a group of  
egg-headed, tentacled, slimier-than-thou aestheticians with  
techniques

far beyond ours to visit earth,  
abduct naive poets, and inculcate them

with otherworldly forms that are also,  
if you believe the tabloids, salacious?

And these abductions always seem to  
take place in some provincial setting:

isn't that more than slightly suspicious?  
Why don't they ever reveal themselves

hovering over some mainstream publishing venue?  
It would be nice to get

some answers here - we might learn  
something, about poetry if nothing else,

but I'm not much help, since  
I'm an abductee, at least in

theory, though, like I say, I  
don't remember much. And this writing

seems pretty ordinary: complete sentences; semicolons;  
yada yada. I seem to have

lost my avant-garde card in the  
laundry. Maybe the aliens took it;

they say that's typical. Maybe I  
never had it. Well, you'll just

have to use your judgment, earthlings!  
Judgment, that's your job! Awake or

asleep! 24/7! Back to work now!  
As if you could quit! And

you thought gravity was a problem!

Now, I'm biased of course, but while I find this poem to have more secure knowledge about pedagogy and the avant-garde than I do, I'm not sure exactly what that knowledge is. It seems a rather anti-pedagogical poem. How is the earthling, that is, the addressee, that is, the student, to learn judgment? The alien voice of the poem simply says that it is inescapable. But does that mean that judgment can't be taught? Isn't judgment the most important thing to teach, whether in Creative Writing contexts, or in literature classes? Isn't judgment the most essential element of a vital literature, one that is both civically active and artistically ambitious? I hear these questions calling out for an answer beyond my own opinions: in other words, I will stop here, and solicit your comments. My last point is this: that the avant-garde in its beginnings was aimed against conventional

social judgment; whereas now, writing of any kind, if it aspires to be new, must activate the social processes of judgment as widely and vividly as possible. I'm using judgment here as an open-ended process, without an already-known ethical answer.

## End Notes

- 1 Bob Perelman. 'A Body'. *Virtual Reality*. NYC: Roof Books, 1993. (This excerpt slightly revised.) Return to article
- 2 Northrop Frye. *An Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973. Return to article
- 3 Mary Carruthers. *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*. Cambridge UP, 1998. Return to article
- 4 Michael Heyward. *The Ern Malley Affair*. Introduction by Robert Hughes. London: Faber and Faber, 1993. Return to article
- 5 Charles Bernstein. *My Way: Speeches and Poems*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1999. Return to article
- 6 Harvey Peskin, Ph.D. 'Ma Vie En Rose (My Life in PINC)'. <http://www.pincsf.org/news22.html> Return to article
- 7 Frank O'Hara. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Donald Allen. Berkeley: U California Press, 1995. Return to article
- 8 Paul Mann. *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Return to article
- 9 Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1981. Return to article
- 10 Stendhal. *Racine and Shakespeare*. Trans. Guy Daniels. [New York]: Crowell-Collier Press, [1962]. Return to article
- 11 Charles Baudelaire. 'The Painter of Modern Life'. In Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds) with Jason Gaiger. *Art in Theory 1815-1900*. London: Blackwell, 1998. Pp 493-506. Return to article
- 12 Louis Zukofsky. 'A'. Berkeley: U California Press, 1978. Return to article
- 13 T.S. Eliot. *Selected Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950. Return to article
- 14 Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten. 'Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto'. *Social Text* 19/20 (Fall 1988): 261-75. (The magazine's editors added the designation 'A Manifesto' without consulting us.) Return to article
- 15 Steve Evans. 'The Resistible Rise of Fence Enterprises'. *Third Factory: Notes to Poetry* 2004. <http://www.thirdfactory.net/resistible.html> Return to article

*Bob Perelman is a Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. His name has long been associated with the Language Poetry movement. His sixteen books of poetry include Ten to One: Selected Poems (Wesleyan UP) and The Future of Memory (Roof Books). His critical books are The*

Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky  
(*California UP*) and The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and  
Literary History (*Princeton UP*).

---

**TEXT**

**Vol 8 No 1 April 2004**

**<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>**

**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady**

**[Text@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Text@griffith.edu.au)**