



**LA -
BAS**

LA-BAS/EXPERIMENTAL POETRY & POETICS

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POETRY/FICTION

Keith Abbott
Bruce Andrews
Charles Bernstein
Michael Davidson
Larry Eigner
Peter Frank
Lou Horvath
Douglas Messerli
Charles North

POETICS/COMMENTARY

Ray Ragoŝta: "Strategies and Speculations"
(on John Ashbery)
Patricia Eakins: "Tropical N.Y.,"
(on Guy Beining and Paul Grillo)

NEW BOOKS/MAGAZINES

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c La-bas, 1977
Douglas Messerli, editor

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THE JOHN CALVIN TAG TEAM POETRY MATCH

"O man I worked so hard
on this poem
just like Uncle Lem
in his factory"

Lament of the Overworked American Poet
worried the Debbil might find out
about his idle poetic hands

HOW COME there's this great fear
of writing an easy poem
take 20 seconds & knock off
an absolutely ravishing lyric
which will live forever
in all the correct anthologies

Or else: "I am Uncle Lem
in my factory
I just write these
part-time"

Admire Admire
So Diaphanous Blue Muse
shows up in your sales
meeting

"Ex-cuse me good buddies
but I gotta talk to
this divine apparition
in the corner"

#

SURE & by the time I came up
thru the ranks the only leisure time
(or so it seemed then) a poet could take
without feeling guilty was in an asylum

"He's aworkin' so hard on them poems
he's breakin' down all the time"

#

THE JOHN CALVIN TAG TEAM POETRY MATCH cont.]

(OR as my father used to say:
"The only thing machines do,
Keith,
is break down.")

#

Luckily I got a family
who thinks nothing of it
when I put my fork down
& drift off upstairs
to disappear for hours

INCOMMUNICADO

ECSTATIC

AMAZED

It's not exactly work
but starfire *ooooo sapphire* pleasure

-Keith Abbott

From LOVE SONGS

NO 169

\$7.50 for Working Papers in Cultural Studies.

"I tortured the dress with the details of our honeymoon."

Article adjective noun verb.

Sweet 16. Get a job. Beep Beep. Tossin' & Turnin'.

Potency was weakened but preserved.

Not light but piss.

Worthless caterpillar.

Stop telling me what to do.

Men found married and dead.

Not wrinkled knuckles but instead a resemblance of
a bird net.

Glorious fictions.

Why bite somebody else's headache, queens scream ?

Errorless extinction of puny responses.

Some happenstance.

Knotty pine.

Avoid life, talk it over.

Lines set off their own boundaries, some of which
virtually gleam with a sort of zeal.

It's therapeutic.

Look at that windshield so idly to be cured.

Unlax.

All the electrical parts safely on the outside.

Angry sassy faggots, kiss my disservice.

NO 169B

Fire in the cake.

Forgotten it entirely.

Pragmatic, idealistic, loner, humorless, serious,
highly self-determined, deliberation, conscientious, rigid.

"Bumble Boogie" by B. Bumble and the Stingers.

Gles. And.

Afraid, uh, of losing my inheritance. Caught in a
joke.

Look at the wedding pictures.

Deliberate irreversible damaging of an individual's
brain for the purpose of altering behavior that
others have deemed undesirable.

Dawdle along the habit of responding to everything
you see.

Don't tattle. Be patties.

A fly walks instantly full circle.

Selfish as a parasol.

That. That. Save.

Picking teeth cleaning my overdone radios.

One. One.

24, not much more.

[Cont.]

NO 169B cont.]

Nite, Ether.

Science fiction : solution of the puppets.

You can relax, the boogie man's gone.

NO 170

1. Lack of.

2. A + B

3. Spite Well Paid.

4. BOSTON ORGAN

Women Demeaned by Mean Men.

There are the four spoons Bosco.

Levels of fascination.

So.

I'm fourteen let me blow my own candles.

This is it, for the gipper.

That's the lamp here are the ribs.

One big failure trying to clean out of my ribs.

I cuss out, with yeast.

[Cont.]

NO 170 cont.]

Half-admiring self-mockery eating the flag.

Puppets failure relax purpose afraid dust weekend.
Afraid puppets puppets failure dust. Dust
weekend.

Disembodied.

And this is such a time, space inhabiting a pace of
impotence.

Rein.

Worthless caterpillars.

Dust. Deft touch. Race.

I, uh, have this child.

CAMBODGE, I licked 'em, chili-picker.

You are the largest, in an embracing field - small
objects mostly.

Uncabineted speaker calls for succinylcholine and
Prolixin Ethanate.

Lie and wait : frail.

Clean filament he can't hear you finds no daughter.

Labiodental.

Is snubbed when.

PEPSI. \$18 ounce Jamaican. Staccato ballerinas.

[Cont.]

NO 170 cont.]

Where white sand continued continent in unison.

Oh, these winds of shame.

Tumult verbal.

I am quite drunk again and enclose a postage stamp
quite elaborate in its design and the remarkable
detail in particular at the cornices.

IONIZING TISSUE.

8th Loosha.

Poor circulation in left leg, wanna bet ?

Mole blind = adj.

Fir-ma-ment.

Logos elixir.

Enter a home.

In the basement of a dream are sticks and elements
of mercy.

NO 171

Miss Kids. Write when can. White wait.

Tasted.

Locker room and the Princess of Darkness. Tossle.

In a high wind you're gonna get a little dust.

Have to iron my uniform - an illusion hidden by a
specious determination.

Under, under, and under. You're alive - on a raincheck.

A sort of undercurrent.

Me coax home.

Belt around elbows.

The clanking musical of chairs.

Shrimp woman.

Treat men like minds women like bodies myself scaring.

Implant the bombs tonight.

Greed, gossip, big novelists.

A skeleton of digressions.

[Cont.

NO 171 cont.]

Flashes, identical.

Gum Quarantine.

Playing flopping with the toy trains.

Impeccable rucksack, my daughter.

Oh, monkey dwarfs.

Rubber. Plural.

Cecil Taylor 1971 1972 Linda Ronstadt 1973 Rod
Stewart. Cranky particularization.

Disciples of Spicer and Duncan (Stanley, Persky, Kyger)

Hierophant.

Passion's bookmarks.

The worst weekend in recent memory.

-Bruce Andrews

is like a
is a
its its
one has a conception
looks
wants somehow
stares at
that it
some kind of
who is not a part
allowing for
and yourself
that they be there
that they somehow
are in
everything one must
that that
one has to
i mean its tremendous
its a very

-Charles Bernstein

THE BEAN FIELD

itself, with all
& cannot possibly
a few pulls
as for a
the bell, there
on fire, --or
deep, suck, &
deliberately, to front
the day is
an--to a
in us: by
profaned, an hour
so poor an
slumbering? They are
all, by dead
error & clot
stripped. Up comes
as if this
nostrils, (what kind
ends! If the
fodder & harness

[Cont.

THE BEAN FIELD cont.]

for that a
wrought. That some
Boston by so
these bolts will
yet interferes it
all news, as
in the orbit
to seat all
huge & lumbering
blots. Every path
reefs & Indian
husks, old junk
blush? With which
sand cherry, blueberry
that alluvian that
called, is gossip
legs; pine cones
whizzing sound, hewn
beholds it; going
oxen, as if
too, is gone
they sang it

[Cont.]

THE BEAN FIELDS cont.]

hags! Yet I
gelatinous mildewey tether
hissing of urn
screech-owl or
this vast. Range
too. Thought it
am conscious of
out, I sat
pitch pane across
"I should think
a point in
way? This which
of space is
legs, congregate, but
to issue, as
its roots in
is called a
view of it
this. Not rays
never got fair
well; I was
occasions. In fact

[Cont.]

THE BEAN FIELD cont.]

distraction. Nearest to
as an abandoned
in a sane
have hired, with
consequences; & all
me, which, as
is always alone
itself. What company
& fringed it
together, cheek by
precisely these objects

-Charles Bernstein

noteworthy no doubt for its
exquisite flaws, note the delicate
breaks that line its epicenter, the
gentle tear on its seam, flaws that
transform an ordinary object into
a breathtakingly perfect example of
human beauty, neither
machine like in its stark impersonal
precision nor pedestrian in its thoughtless
assemblage of elements, here the alchemy
of a magnificent sensibility again triumphant
in a world increasingly dominated by the mass

-Charles Bernstein

From SENTENCES

I feel too dependant.

I feel no sense of myself.

I continually need reassurance.

I feel she won't really express her feelings.

I feel shut out.

I can project everything and be reassured of nothing.

I am constantly feeling left.

I see in her silence and distance the same fear and pain I have.

I see how much she means to them.

I expect to be refused.

I feel an intruder.

I see her pulling back.

I just can't keep being understanding.

I'll be disappointed, crushed.

I don't want to go through it again.

I don't exactly know how to act.

-Charles Bernstein

From SENTENCES

you say to yourself is it me is it my fault is it
something i'm mistaking or getting wrong or failing
to see

it comes all about as bleakness, you never feel as
rich but in the emptiness, seeing a few things,
one or two, and being almost overwhelmed

people come in, you talk to them, you wonder if they
really are seeing the same things, if they are willing

you design patterns to get it all down, you stay up
all night trying to figure out the puzzles you've
created for yourself, you can't understand why so
few care, you forget about what you were thinking
and can't remember

you say to yourself let it go but you can't figure out
what to let go

-Charles Bernstein

From SENTENCES

You try to keep from going crazy with boredom.

You become accustomed as time goes by.

You read magazines.

You sleep.

You do anything to keep from going nuts.

You're very much occupied.

You're fighting to maintain your speed.

You have to be superalert all the time.

You have to anticipate situations a block ahead of you.

You have to get all psyched up.

You always give that smile.

You say to yourself one day my time will come.

You try to show a cockiness like you could care less.

You get in deeper and deeper.

-Charles Bernstein

From SENTENCES

You think of bringing back together all the people you ever knew.

You think of how it feels to be together again.

You try somehow to escape the fact of its absence, of its flight,
of its no longer being there.

You write letters.

You call people up.

You hurriedly meet with people.

You hope to find it.

You hope it will return.

You make fun of yourself.

You say it isn't so serious.

You try to be ironic.

-Charles Bernstein

THE BIG THOMSON FLOOD

The purposes and their refusal, the portapotties and the wilderness. Why do you disparage your environment when you clearly live in it? The alternatives to anxiety and the miserable bungalows which they live in. A new kitten to replace the one who got away. The disaster and the drive home through the desert. The purposes may have their agents but you are not one of them. He descends in a body of phrases, incomplete but necessary to survival. The decisions leading to anxiety and the buying of supplies. You go out of the house and the purposes take over like a rain you can't avoid because it needs you as a witness. And it comes and it drives away all thoughts of discretion and the wisdom in living. This is why helicopters and hot cocoa are essential to the grandeur of vistas, broad faced waves and palm trees, the chattering of squirrels and the death of prairie dogs from bubonic plague. This is the real wilderness. He will comfort you in the morning when everyone wants feeding and in the evening when the clouds roll back and reveal a plan of daring and complexity. Completed in sleeping. Does your father know where you are and what is his business, social security number and politics. Is the sentence infallible because of the generations who have used it and failed? Does the lack of rain in the Dakotas speak to the surfeit of water in Lake Powell? And where are its yellow boats? At the end of the convention the candidate raises his hands because there is nothing else to do and besides we expect it. The fidgets of remembrance: a train along a river as merely a repetition of a landscape with no purpose. It was not our fault but let me give you this reassurance in case you don't believe us. As simple clarification of a vacation, its purposes and refusals, its numbers and coefficients, its backyards and truckstops.

You are going to the beginning, to the place of beginnings, to the inception of the sentence, to the source of all waters, to the end of your resources only there to find something to play with. Desultory rolling of a ball about the floor with which the drama of pistols and shelter is reenacted. Parcels and boxes accumulate about the house, a newly framed picture hangs on the wall. Folders, stacks of paper, molding fruit, horns above the kitchen. Everyone knows what you do because they are all looking and making the most of your discomfiture. A small girl is murdered on her way to buy a newspaper; there was nothing in the news anyway and someone buys a watermelon. The heat accompanies

[Cont.]

BIG THOMSON FLOOD cont.]

the desert to the tune of driving where no one cares to. The purposes and the will to power, a wind octet and four newly varnished chairs. In money, the reasons for its dissolution; no money, only gearboxes, oil filters and eyesores for those who don't know what to do with it. In the middle of the rock, a hole and over the hole a sign saying entrance; before this, a hole in the rock and before this a rock. Or a hole. The choice was clear and we passed it up, got into a disaster and escaped with out skins which was more than we thought.

-Michael Davidson

LOVE ME, LOVE MY DOG

It's a lot clearer since you wrote me that letter. How could I have doubted YOU of all people, unless it was my own sloughing-off of responsibility that refused to listen to reason, preferred a desultory walk over fake surfaces. But you know exactly what it's about. A letter goes out, expectant and flushed with purpose, and nothing returns. Love me, love my dog. I used to think it was because of living so far from the city (as you also do), but I remember living there and being as anxious as I am now. But place constructs its own great walls. You find someone to talk to and begin wondering why they keep unscrewing their head or forgetting your name. You'd forget theirs, given the proper distraction. I don't mean "You" but lower case you as in Henry James. If I could get over the worry about loss of writing, friends, plants, sense of perspective, money, etc. I could sit down and tell a simple story:

Once there was a little kitten who was always being chased around the backyard by a big, floppy-eared basset named Wino. The cat thought the dog had murder in his heart and ran all the harder while the dog had only a heart of gold and wagging tail which he wanted desperately to show the cat. The moral of all this (since they are still running) must be that one of them should turn around and take a chance, the dog to see how far he has come in chasing pleasure and the cat to see how little he had to run.

-Michael Davidson

POEMS BY LARRY EIGNER

Aug 9, 1976

I haven't seen the squirrel
in the downpour
on clear days close sky up
running along the wire

Aug 18, 1976

sun some
walls
white now
years

Aug 18, 1976

roadside
squirrel
down
shadow
cast
from high
the opposite

POEMS BY LARRY EIGNER cont.]

Aug 19, 1976

all

purpose

?

or none

Air
in the yard of
another house

For
Sam
Borash

a phone bell
miles away

in
doors

a small willow
by the front steps

a life
assumes
a name



THE BEER COUNCIL

It broke. Warm February scribbled on the door,
came in, sprawled on the unrecognizable couch
of our petrified sight. The coughing started then.
(We made a dash for the table and wound up
under the table.) The beach was littered
with old horoscopes, probably of people who
had locked themselves forever in festivals of stains.
The glands dangled musically beyond the window.
Beyond the glands, for all intents and purposes,
the rest of a shrivelled landscape swung
as if buffeted by the same intuition that rolled
throughout the house, charming and perverse,
catching on the furniture with peals of laughter,
exploring the attic as if hungry, slamming
by the piano in a parody of some treasure hunt.

"History

's enough for me."

It broke as it had broken. Because it
had been taken seriously,
it broke as it had broken,
melodiously.

-Peter Frank

November 9, 1975
New York

WHERE WE MEAN

I've had enough weak speech. The words
can make us go round these places,
bridges tight enough, roads, ruts, and smokestacks
willing enough to tell us what they are,
time against the sky-- but not remembered
right. A second-hand second hand, an atmosphere
four times removed: the window, the movement,
the artifice, the philosophy; and all of this,
anyway, dumb in time, stale in space,
perverse in method, slack in sense.

-Peter Frank

November 14, 1975
between New York and Philadelphia

RARE BALLS

The way it sprung back into the head

SPECIALTY OF THE HOUSE

I love shooting coffee

THE BOSS

Calisthenics for skeletons?

CONSTANT COMMENT

This is a ritual of the pocketbook

ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK

Tunics galore!

TIRADE

The clever satchels bake a cake

THE DROMEDARY

Leave me to my own devices!

LAUGHABILITY

The storage boy has buffeted the rickshaw

A LOOSELEAF SCHNOOK

Busybodies have their off days, too

[Cont.]

THE PICTURE TUBE

I seem to be an interjection

OCELOT JELLY

All the robot's cocoa?

GOVERNMENT BY FRIGIDAIRE

Take a whiff!

STYMIED

Banality full of tornadoes

QUASIMODO

Each of these nickels is better than the next

-June 16 and 25, 1975
New York

-Peter Frank
in collaboration with
Glenn Alcott

POEM

for Margaret Nomentana

Very strange tears. This understanding hand
will set itself against a continent. Given
that I press my lips against the windowpane--
and given, too, that you speak to me more
vibrantly than if you were pure music-- there
is a respiration in the earth, a devastating
artless tympanum of smoke, brilliant
in my nerve and rendering my sense of you,
even as it wavers spectrally, extinct.
The gestures have been sterner, the eyes
have been given firmer strokes; the spaces
swell like nearby canyons full of light.
I have had to travel with questions in my lap,
have had to invent the incantations of a year,
and I can't forget the panic of a brain
locked in a summer tunnel. It's been all
worth it if it's been working to this point
where I stand and stare abashedly at the point
itself. You broadcast much, I love for that.

-February 2-3, 1975
New York

-Peter Frank

ROOMS

for David Ricks and Lynn Coburn

The way things work: a making sure
that fruit and comfort fall toward
a magnanimous breath, the point
at which two sides win out, scapes
across a common mind. It does not give
forth with pure thanks; there seems
to be foreknowledge of classlessness.
Maze at well edges. Sleeplessness
and sleepfulness. The curtains bake!
The hallways fill with rags and grace.
There is a mouse. The way some items
have a habit of accumulating (dust,
music, money, soap, castles, love): you
move, and they are always there ahead of you.

-August 16, 1975
Stephentown, New York

-Peter Frank

MY POEM

Walking the corridors of depression
After a long period
This house
Is huge
Go there & drive yourself
mad

Flickering light
Behind a door
Walk in
There you are
Flooded with brightness
To know you've been there
before

Find that opening faster
I'm verbalizing
I got depressed
I deal with it every time
It's like seeing a movie
Of myself
But
That's the way it goes.

-Lou Horvath

CAT'S EYE CAMERA

The Surface
Nervous
The Fish

Through
The Dreams
Water In

Swirls With
White And
Ice.

-Lou Horvath

DESCRIBE THE DARK

Stars as points on a skeleton, atomic weight
Distant ships, the larger ships approaching
Horizon eye hesitates to look inward

The land, the steps down to the sea, far off
Far out. Water turns to summer, wind flutes
Sea. The lamp in my room over something

On the cliff--Lighthouse. What part where
A story, a slid in space. Mediterranean
The wind fails to rise, no travel no sea

Bound as in rape, we the undone
Spread words across my chest, wind wrapped rain
The hole falls in, glove of the Knight in Starlight

Moving away my shadow stays on the earth
A long spirit to examine the emptiness as an evening
Falling forever, hollow dark, describe the dark.

-Lou Horvath



I THOUGHT YOU

I thought you
Were the sun setting to
Inherit the muscles

Of seasons
Shapes abandon
The wave's memory hiding

And hunting for owls
Seekers for
Adventure
Spiritual fluid

Whispers near to silence
Night joins
The secret gleam
Off the fog

Light in several parts
The hair falling out through the
Birds approach the sky
Square light.

-Lou Horvath

BLUE DRUMS

Lustful or chaste
Sleep
Then, a
Figment
Blues, quite a
Beating
Of the wind.

-Lou Horvath

PAINTERLY COIL

Hooded snake
Leaving is comfort

A line of knee
Breast and eye

Ice age air
Knitted to pine

Sent the canvas song
High boughed

Colors chill
Then ablaze

I thought I saw Manet
In the minaret

Deep eaves for wrenn
And a river

Parachutes mirrors
Into the snow.

-Lou Horvath

EROS from NAMING

it must never be nursed to restore milk--
the iguana, the spiny lizard with a black & thorny throat.
if there are no women this extends to the sight of others--
yams, maize, rice, the machete--so they declare--

since the male suckled his son
string after string paints a thin straight line bedded in muscles
making the expression worse. did the children milk from monsters--
their gold ornaments--plaintains, bananas, star apples, limes, breadfruits?

the family must not fail this obligation--
a clawbone, the bark of a certain tree, the fat of crocodiles.
the blaze spreads
with a song composed entirely of names.

-Douglas Messerli

MOHAWK from NAMING

at each lock the river was drawn from a hatful of names
& lived here side by side like an iceberg:
this is an old lake, what a hill looked like right here in Rome
hugging the river to be a sharpshooter now vanished
sick at heart with an Irish tongue like a long speech finally collapsed
a deer for buckskin in the dim ravine
the likenesses twinkling their dusk across
more melodiously than the Welsh.

-Douglas Messerli

THE TIDES

from NAMING

sat on the very seat
with its black oak rooms
overhead
month's crop of hair hanging low
(nothing human except salvage)
that his facts come to him raw
& sometimes were swept
shipwreck limp upon a platform
again when the current ran brisk
pool where the dogs have brought otter
to a stand
without a voice
swagger in the streets
between sweet cakes, thin
with deprecating smiles
before the brown river water turns
pleasantly panted

*

The shore: shells (clam, piss clam, oyster, mussel,
barnacle, snail, lobster husk), seaweed,
wood

The body: sand (between the toes, in the knee bend,
in the folds of the scrotum, in the button

[cont.

THE TIDES cont.]

of the belly, in the arm pits), grit of
the mouth

The birds: gulls, large gulls, pigeons, terns

The sky: overcast grey, a line of cobalt

*

were pulling from

their cameras

surface

stone

& fled to the southern coast

past steel & bone & muscle

patches of

the brilliant sun

I offer as self-defence

the disappearing hills

lips of its bay

so curved

you will always find shelter

*

South China
East China
North
Yellow
Caribbean
Bearing
Baltic

THE TIDES cont.]

Mediterranean
Red
Hudson Bay
Persian Gulf

Gulf of Mexico
Gulf of St. Lawrence
Sea of Okhotsk
Gulf of California
Sea of Japan

These are the seas,

Pacific
Atlantic
Indian
Arctic

the oceans

-Douglas Messerli

THE VILLAINY OF CLARE BOOTH LUCE
(from a line in Shakespeare)

in such a love so vile a lout

lutes so lovely

the vile lout loves

in such vileness

incest lovingness

loots love

routs it out

takes up the vial of love

looses the violin

lets out violence

violating

the love

rouses the louse

loses the root of love

lays loose the villain

the villainy of Clare Booth Luce

in the villa Luce

hangs bouganvillea

hangs violet and burgandy in the village

Pancho Villa hangs around Burgandy

a paunchy burhger hangs himself

sticks

his head in the noose

sticks

THE VILLAINY OF CLARE LUCE BOOTH cont.]

a head out
strikes ahead
strikes out
goes it alone
goes his own way
goes off
goes off his rocker
gets his rocks off
beats off
beats the pants off
his friend
beats up
his wife
breaks up
breaks the law
breaks out
breaks out the booze
collapses and comes to
comes round
comes out
comes off a fool
foolishly
comes back
gets back together
gets back in the swing
swings back to back

THE VILLAINY OF CLARE BOOTH LUCE cont.]

dances cheek to cheek

face to face

faces the dancer

faces the music

pays the piper

pays for this round

plays around

plays a round

plays a lay

lays and plays

lays around

round and round

to the lutes on the phonograph

-Douglas Messerli

WHY COLUMBUS LEFT
(for Dick)

a strange continuum
is sleeping in his bed
like a cape
obscure accident
it moves across & across
the maladroitness
I'll immigrate via radio
getting beyond sweetheart beyond
enter your room
fondling snake eyes
pretty soon you're no imposter
after all
the snow is falling
God bless
they throw kisses in the air
& hang
over the years

-Douglas Messerli

NON-VERBS

Jumping, running, boating,
Standing on the shore, watching trees move;

Hurrying the kids, locking the camper,
Waiting for the ball to drop into the glove;

Joining, bathing, batting,
Covering up, loading the truck;

Farting, eating shit,
Weaving Indian rugs, listening to the Four Aces;

Gesturing, moping, electroplating,
Committing, Little Gidding, becoming a cigar;

Snowing on the azaleas, diving for treasure,
Doing the twist, getting a rope burn;

Propitiating the household gods, Gieseking,
Uncorking, signalling by semaphor

-Charles North

LITTLE POEM IN JULY

She has to wake up sometime.
And the chicken--
It has to leave the oven
With a whirr of wings
Out into the hyacinth sunset

Where dinner is tied
To its friend and archrival the river
Filled to overflowing with dolphins
On the monstrous head
Neck and shoulders we call time.

Or it call us that,
Since our connection
Is purely circumstantial; sliding
Off the view this late
Almost lavender mid-July evening.

-Charles North

ALL-TIME ALL STAR TEAM HONORABLE MENTION

- 1b Breasts
Eggplant
Milton
- 2b Keats
The Baker's Wife
- 3b Bedroom
- ss Pope
- 1f Brahms
Syphillis (Gonorrhea)
Blue
- cf Children of Paradise
Dining room
Hepatitis
Mozart
- rf Hips
Beans
Moby Dick
- c Buttocks
- p Kitchen (Fall-Winter*)
New York

-Charles North

STRATEGIES AND SPECULATIONS

John Ashbery has to his credit a considerable achievement, the winning of three major literary awards for a single volume, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, as well as a rather curious distinction, being quoted in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1974) under, of all words, "disappoint" (a tribute, by the way, Webster's also accords to another notoriously difficult writer, Gertrude Stein, though her word is "alright."

A further point proving that the ways of recognition are indeed strange is the initial critical reception of Ashbery's Rivers and Mountains, a collection recently reissued by Ecco Press. Although reviews at the time generally helped improve Ashbery's reputation, a number of even the favorable ones contained a misconception that unfortunately carries into subsequent evaluations of the poet's work, like Richard Howard's and Harold Bloom's. These opinions tended to classify Rivers and Mountains as a book whose merit depended on a very fine long poem, "The Skaters," and according to a few critics, on an intriguing yet nearly impenetrable poem, "Clepsydra." A review in Poetry went so far as to call "The Skaters" the "book's reason for being." Along with overlooking some noteworthy poems, such reactions underestimate a significant point in Ashbery's development.

"The Skaters" and "Clepsydra" do deserve the attention they receive not only for their quality but also for their indicating one of Ashbery's singular strengths, his ability to sustain long complex meditations, as he does in "Fragment," in the entire Three Poems, and in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." To accomplish this, Ashbery employs devices ranging from catalogs to some quite involved strategies. An example of the latter that recurs in Ashbery's poetry is found in the two poems from Rivers and Mountains. It is a strategy that Ashbery resorts to when trying to synthesize extremes or dualisms. "Clepsydra" presents it abstractly:

But the condition
Of those moments of timeless elasticity and blindness
Was being joined secretly so
That their paths would cross again and be separated
Only to join again in a final assumption rising like a shout
And be endless in the discovery of the declamatory
Nature of the distance traveled.

while "The Skaters" contains it in this image: "As skaters elaborate their distances,/Taking a separate line to its end. Returning to the mass,/they join each other."

These passages look ahead to those like the passage found in

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STRATEGIES AND SPECULATIONS cont.]

"The System" (Three Poems) where, after considering the two kinds of happiness arbitrarily termed the "frontal" and the "latent," Ashbery concludes that the two are the same, that "this second kind of happiness is merely a fleshed-out, realized version of that ideal first kind...".

But, more important, Rivers and Mountains as a whole establishes a concept of poetry that existed only incompletely in the earlier books. Instead of the well-crafted objects of Some Trees or the open-ended verbal researches of The Tennis Court Oath, the poems of Rivers and Mountains are what Ashbery calls "a record of thought processes"; they document explorations of consciousness in which Ashbery speculates on rather than interprets experience. The poems fill a time period circumscribing a particular exploration, and except for being punctuated by a temporary personal resolution, they give no impression of finality, no impression that Ashbery arrives at any absolute conclusion. The reader feels that the process can and will continue. In this regard the poetry resembles that of Wallace Stevens' later period, which, incidentally, Ashbery much admires.

Although the speculative quality of the poems frustrates close readings, it is still possible to detect some quite revealing general movements. In almost all the shorter poems in the book, Ashbery begins with an attempt to break out of the subjective by casting private thoughts in objective molds. Then he proceeds through a number of variations--based on diverse elements like childhood memories, worn-out phrases, references to geography, urban settings, rural landscapes--in order to test the preoccupations of the moment. Finally, he closes in quiet reflection, with a settling back into subjectivity.

"The Ecclesiast" provides an interesting example of this approach. It begins with the suggestion of a cryptic narrative: "'Worse than the sunflower,' she had said./But the new dimension of truth had only recently/Burst in on us"; then the poem goes through a series of variations such as this transformation of cliché into an expression of dilemma: "For the shoe pinches, even though it fits perfectly/Apples were made to be gathered, also the whole host of the world's ailments and troubles"; and, finally, the poem ends with a paradox that underscores the speaker's feeling of separateness: "The factories are all lit up,/The chime goes unheard./We are together at last, though far apart."

There is something perplexing about poems like "The Ecclesiast"--"These Lacustrine Cities," "Civilization and Its Discontents," and "The Thousand Islands," for instance--and the main reason for this lies neither in their syntactical complexity nor in their extreme intimacy, but in Ashbery's attitude. Though the implicit attempt to move outward is continually defeated, Ashbery maintains a calm, at times even humorous tone. If, however, one looks at a related group of references, daydreams and travels, some of this perplexity disappears. "The Skaters" recounts an episode in which the speaker imagines that he is marooned on a desert

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STRATEGIES AND SPECULATIONS cont.]

island until he suddenly awakens to the fact that he, in his middle-class apartment, is an urban exile. An earlier poem from Some Trees, "The Instruction Manual," works similarly. Here the speaker, while writing an instruction manual, fantasizes about a trip to Guadálajara, which concludes with an ironic admission of his actual distance from such an adventure, "How limited, but how complete withal, has been our experience of Guadálajara!" These daydreams serve to magnify a problematic situation so that it can be more clearly understood, the troublesome elements purged, and some realization, often an unexpected one, reached.

The poem "Rivers and Mountains" reiterates this idea in the image of strategy. The third stanza reads:

Your plan was to separate the enemy into two groups
With the razor-edged mountains between.
It worked well on paper
But their camp had grown
To be the mountains and the map
Carefully peeled away and not torn
Was the light, a tender but tough bark
On everything. Fortunately the war was solved
In another way by isolating the two sections
Of the enemy's navy so that the mainland
Warded away the big floating ships.

In short, Ashbery has faith that a resolution will occur, even if it occurs with the aid of chance.

Of course, it would be a mistake to think that Ashbery relies entirely on random discovery, for he so structures a poem that it imposes an order that counteracts the effects of randomness. The poem works as any form of perception does--organizing, selecting. Like the image on the retina or any kind of sensory information, the poem mirrors external reality by means of a process taking place apart from the source, in the individual. In its own way the poem functions mimetically as Ashbery states in his "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror": "These words are only speculation/(From the Latin speculum, mirror)."

So, if one is to arrive at any permanent resolution, or any absolute conclusion, he must do so by working with or against his essential separateness--by probing and by speculating. Throughout Rivers and Mountains Ashbery confronts this circumstance, one central in all his poetry, with a skill and maturity equaling those of the later work. It is no small accomplishment.

Rivers and Mountains, by John Ashbery. N.Y.: Ecco Press, 1977(new ed.). \$3.50, 63 pp.

-Ray Ragosta

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TROPICAL NEW YORK

Manhattan Spiritual sounds like a 1940's jazz chorale by, say, Gershwin--a work now performed frequently by midwestern Christian college choirs when they want to do something modern and "black." But in fact Manhattan Spiritual is the title of an interesting first book of poems by Guy Beining and Paul Grillo. "Dreamtalkers," they call themselves, and it is undoubtedly to the dreamlike quality of their work and to its urban imagery that the title refers.

When I first saw Guy Beining, he was wearing a white suit and looked like a planter from one of the more prosperous Caribbean islands. And for me there is something tropical, however urban, about his part of the book--the lushness and profusion of the images, the exotic juxtapositions, the fevered temperature of much of it. (I will ignore the temptation to speak of surrealism). Beining's work often proceeds like a rain forest springing up on the page, images proliferating beyond reason, threatening to engulf the poet, and his city is never far from nature. The burgeoning apocalypse of man's self-destruction becomes a perversion of nature's hegemony:

BULLET FACTOR

a spider lifted my finger
& i became a small puppet
as another city fades into itself
a bee turns my paper into wax wings
& rebuilds the city into a ghost gray hive
& hanging from the sparrows breasts
maggots pink & lazy
giving cities their lusty sunsets
& by the ended cities the leaves
of fire brush are pale scars
& lastly i see white suns
eat on their orange hunches
the glass mask of skyscrapers.

This is the international voice of contemporary angst. And yet these poems are often much more recognizably American, both in content and in a kind of reluctant vulnerability:

NIGHT SPOT

the nigerian singer
was from baltimore
& her blues
built factories of song
& she could wail them
out of existence
she a fast express

TROPICAL NEW YORK cont.]

to those with gloves
& laced corners.

The antimacho macho perspective--is the poet singing a love song or an elegy?--is not the least bit exotic, and the ambiguity of the tone only makes the poem seem a more authentic document of the moral jungle of urban life.

Beining's is a survivor's voice--he is speaking to us after the eating of "the glass mask of skyscrapers," after the factories of song have been wailed out of existence. Sometimes these poems seem to have been scraped off the poet like skin off knees--the way the lines pile up raggedly, in short, fast-breath lines--and this rawness makes them documents of experience unflinchingly felt if not always unflinchingly scrutinized. The poet stands naked, bombarded with sensations, almost without the shield of ordering intelligence; that he resists his own urge to order seems to me at once the strength and the weakness of these poems.

In no poem is the survivor's lyric sung more intimately, with a greater sense of the human scale, than in "Close Night":

in candlelight
the lovers looked
at old burns &
frosty scars
& watched the minnows
swallow the hard heart.
it is old as sand;
some creatures always
backing sweetly into the
moon, grinning wildly
slowly hurrying out the light.

Grillo's poems come second in the book and should perhaps have come first, because they seem culturally younger. His most convincing poems are poems of balance and of original observation partly for its own sake. Sometimes the particularity of this observation is striking for its tenderness as well as its economy and its scrutiny, say in two short lines from "Spirit Lamp":

homely
beautifully made-up girls

The first line of this poem is "The night believes in the key of E," which lets us know that this is a poem, programmatic music. Calling attention to the frame amounts to a Brechtian pulling back, but the complexity of the vision does not seem to require distance from feeling, and I wonder whether the poet takes this tone because he insists on remaining an observer or because he is working up to difficult subject matter in future poems.

Because "Spirit Lamp" calls attention to its frame, we do not have

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TROPICAL NEW YORK cont.]

to take as a sign of any real suffering lines such as "The near-flame corner screams in exhaustion" and "The lamp-black searing the margins/ of dreams." It is just as well; I wish Grillo would resist such pat hysteria, such fraught ennui.

But despite a few tired tricks like unnecessarily parenthetical titles, there can be a melody in his line and a bittersweet balance of imagery that make some of his poems seem close to mastery of a viable latter-day lyric sensibility:

(BLOW-UP BLUES HARMONIUM)

The almondine girl in the junk shop
dreaming nepal and morocco and aztec
airway victrola tunes

all pearls smoke green and lilac
like your wet afternoon Spanish looks

only grew sadder like the rest of us.

Certainly both these poets are worth reading in bigger portions than the hors d'oeuvres found in magazines, and the price of their book (\$2.00) makes a flyer on them eminently affordable.

Manhattan Spiritual, by Paul Grillo and Guy R. Beining. Philadelphia & Brooklyn: Happenstance, 1976. \$2.00, 48 pp.

-Patricia Eakins

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For information and/or to subscribe contact: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, c/o
Charles Bernstein
464 Amsterdam
New York, N.Y. 10024

Corrections: p. 17--title should read THE BEAN FIELD
p. 30--Peter Frank, POEM, last line should read
"itself. You broadcast much. I live for that."

NEW BOOKS:

Ida Applebroog, It is My Lunch Hour (Galileo Works).
John Ashbery, Houseboat Days (Viking).
Barbara Baracks, No Sleep (Tuumba Press, Sept. 1977).
Will Bennett, The Glass Tower (Stone Soup Society).
David Chaloner, Projections (Burning Deck).
George Economou, Ameriki (Sun).
Larry Eigner, The World & Its Streets, Places (Black Sparrow Press).
Dick Higgins, i'm tired of being misunderstood (Famous Last Words).
Bill Knott, Selected and Collected Poems (Sun).
Steven LaVoie, Dawn Through a Rear View Mirror (Famous Last Words).
Opal Nations, Sitting on the Lawn with a Lady Twice My Size (Intermedia Press).
Pat Nolan, Obvious Forgeries (Famous Last Words).
Charles North, Six Buildings (The Swollen Magpie Press).
Paul Violi, Harmatan (Sun).
John Yau, The Reading of an Ever-Changing Tale (Nobodaddy Press).

NEW MAGAZINES:

Bezoar [Box 535, Gloucester, Mass. 01930] (Paul Kahn, Fred Buck and Thorpe Feidt, eds. 0 IX, no. 2 (August 1977): work by Philip Whalen, Franco Beltrametti, Lewis MacAdams & James Koller; IX, no. 3 (September 1977): work by Elaine Randell, Larry Eigner & Tim Reynolds.
Handbook 1 [72 Spring St., Delaware, Ohio 43015 or 50 Spring St., NYC 10012] (Susan Mernit and Rochelle Ratner, eds.) includes work by Marc Kaminsky, Toby Olson, David Wilk, Rochelle Ratner, George Economou, Nathaniel Tarn & William Bronk/& others.
Hills 4 [1220 Folsom, San Francisco, Ca. 94103] (Bob Perelman, ed.) work by Kit Robinson, Larry Eigner, Barrett Watten, Ray DiPalma, Ted Greenwald, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, David Gitin, David Bromige, Fanny Howe, Douglas Woolf & others. An exceptionally good issue of an exceptional magazine.
Hue & Cry [128A West 10 St., NYC 10014] an indescribable Dadist publication.
Roof 3 [Segue Press, 300 Bowery, NYC 10012] (James Sherry, ed.) work by Regina Beck, Yuki Hartman, Ed Friedman, Charles North, Tom Savage, Simon Schuchat, Tony Towle, Paul Violi, John Yau, Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Steve McCaffrey & Ron Silliman. For anyone who likes language!
Sun & Moon 4 [4330 Hartwick Rd. #418, College Park, Md. 20740] (Douglas Messerli & Howard Fox, eds.): work by Douglas Blazek, Charles Henri Ford, Larry Eigner, Ray DiPalma, Michael Davidson, Tom Clark, Barbara Guest, Gerard Malanga, Ted Greenwald, Michael Lally, Brian Swann, Pat Nolan, Don Skiles, Tom Ahern, Richard Kostelanetz, Keith Abbott, Douglas Woolf, Charles North, Lucy Lippard, Stephen Dixon & others.

