

“a different table altogether”

P. Inman in Conversation
with Roger Farr & Aaron Vidaver

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Farr/Vidaver: Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?

Inman: Only on bank holidays...

OK, I'll play it straight. I've never been a member. Raymond Williams has an interesting essay called "You are a Marxist, aren't you?" in which he writes about the slippages between the terms "Marxism," "socialism" & "communism." Unfortunately, he never seems to arrive at any definite differentiation there. But my answer to the question posed in the title would be "yeah, I am." That was Williams' answer as well, by the way. If I'm pressed into choosing between the "m" word & the "s" one, I'll opt for the "m" one. At bottom someone who calls themselves a Marxist remains, it seems to me, committed to a class-based politics. I don't think that's necessarily the case with someone who calls themselves a socialist. & I'm still convinced that any set of emancipatory solutions to the problems we face will have to be arrived at through questions of class. In the U.S., however, class politics seem to have been largely subsumed by identity & to a lesser extent single-issue politics. The importance of the issues clustering about racial, ethnic & gender inequalities can't be overstated; certainly not in this country. It's just that, here at least, such politics seem to always end up crystallizing around questions of redistribution or empowerment; they substitute what are essentially corporatist & particularist concerns for larger, structural ones. The redistribution of wealth or the acknowledgment of minority interests, for example,

don't in & of themselves logically connect to a movement away from a market economy toward a planned one... one which would approach the mushrooming environmental crisis rationally, rather than acquisitively. Nor does the replacement of a pseudo-representational government with a direct & popular one necessarily flow from feminism, anti-racism, or, I hasten to add, trade unionism. It seems to me that the issues facing us today won't be solved by a controlled enlargement of the franchise or an enlightened recognition of differences. Putting more African-Americans on the board of Merck or Eli Lilly won't change those companies' policies with regard to the withholding of AIDS treatment from Africa. The form of indirect genocide being perpetrated by those companies is being driven by profit margins, not by the ethnicity & gender of their leadership. Again, this is not to dismiss the demands of Hispanic Americans, or gays & lesbians, or deep ecologists. Effectively linking class politics with popular movements (identity, ecological, labor...) is absolutely crucial, no doubt. But what's ultimately going to change things is dismantling the board of directors, not reconstituting it. It's a systemic issue, not a personnel one.

Farr/Vidaver: Could you tell us more about your union activities?

Inman: Well, I've been active in local union politics with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) for a little over twenty years now. I started out as a floor steward with Local 2477, the Library of Congress' technician (read:

blue collar & predominantly African-American) local & then moved next door to Local 2910, the Library's "professional" (read: white collar & predominantly white... funny how neatly the color scheme works out there). I've been everything from a front-line steward to Local 2910's vice president. Currently I'm heading up my second master contract negotiating team for Local 2910. All of which probably sounds more impressive than it actually is. The arena within which federal government sector unions such as mine operate is an extremely circumscribed one. We can't go on strike, for instance. We can't, except for a few exceptions, bargain over wages. & we're prohibited, by law, from having a closed shop. We can & do negotiate over things like grievance procedures, unions' institutional rights, protections against discrimination, health & safety issues & workplace benefits. Frequently internal local matters—such as does the local join up with the Labor Party or should the technician & professional locals merge?—turn out to be more politicized & contentious than the ones involving our external relationship with Library management. The internal questions tend to be less legalistically framed & more overtly ideological, involving as they do questions of professionalism vs. labor solidarity. Be that as it may, federal sector unions are severely handcuffed in terms of what organizing & action tools we can use in the workplace. Added to that is the fact that, since the Reagan administration, fed sector unions have been more or less under siege. An increasing amount of federal sector jobs have been either downsized out of existence or contracted out to non-union contractors. In fact, more agency jobs were eliminated under Clinton's Democratic administration

than under either Reagan or Bush I. So there's a very real sense in which fed unions are fighting for institutional survival. Having said all that sad face stuff, nationally labor has, of late, seemed to have been taking a left turn. I'm thinking of its spearheading of the anti "free-trade" (scare quotes around NAFTA supplied upon demand) movement, where the emphasis has gradually moved away from a nationalistic, protectionist one toward an anti-globalization one. And as has probably been the case in Canada as well, significant sectors of labor have been up in the front ranks of the WTO demonstrations. Some of "big labor" now seems committed to building a broad-based, grassroots alliance with environmentalists, immigrants, unorganized workers & students.

PS (12/02). 911 seems to have pushed big labor toward the middle again. Its presence at the local Iraq demonstration last October was small compared to the WTO demo of a year ago. Predictable, no doubt, but regrettable nonetheless. On the other hand Bush II's Homeland Security Act which is, in part, aimed at busting federal sector unions may force labor, in spite of itself, into more radicalized positions.

Farr: Another noticeable shift in recent WTO resistance is the emergence of a newly radicalized youth movement. This formation often declares itself "anarchist," and appears to have been influenced by a particular thread of American anarchism that emerges from the Detroit scene of the 1970's (*Fifth Estate*, John Zerzan, Fredy Perlman, David Watson, et al.) and which also draws

on the political tendencies of the Situationist International: the abolition of work, the rejection of bureaucracy, industrialization, consumerism, and the totality of corporate culture, etc. What do you make of this movement?

Inman: Well, the abolition of work & corporate culture sounds great to me. & it's obvious, as well, that current levels of Western industrialism & consumerism aren't sustainable in terms of the socioeconomic & ecological injustices & imbalances they've created & are perpetuating. So where do I sign up...?

I haven't read any of the *Fifth Estate* group's work, though I'm old enough to remember John Sinclair & the *Fifth Estate* paper. As an overall political strategy anarchism seems pretty problematic. Given the level of Western capital's entrenchment & the immense resources which the various state apparatuses, financial institutions, etc. have at their disposal, it's hard to see how anarchism as a strategy directed toward effecting & sustaining structural change in any developed nation could work. As opposed to some sort of Foucauldian model of localized points of micro-resistance, it seems like any counter-hegemonic strategy needs, ultimately, to be macro-logical; that is to say, among other things, organized. On the other hand, as a means of cultural intervention, Foucauldian models of resistance might make a little more sense. My knowledge about situationism is pretty sketchy, but I'm very sympathetic toward at least part of what I understand its program to be: i.e. the creation of an alternative cultural space outside—or maybe “beside” is better—of the dominant hegemonic institutional

one. The move wouldn't be for writers, for example, to infiltrate the academy & change the lit canon from within. It would instead be to work outside that whole institutional framework & reject questions of canonicity altogether. Not a place at the table, but at a different table altogether. As one of Debord's mentors, Henri Lefebvre, put it, "a refusal to be co-opted." Insisting on a position outside of the mainstream is something I full-heartedly endorse. I'm pretty good at it too.

Vidaver: It was disheartening to see the trade union leaders try to keep their members separated from the troublemaking militants during the Seattle actions on 30 November 1999. So, what happened to revolutionary politics? Perhaps you can address this also by revisiting the questions & remarks from your 1979 statement in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 9/10 on "The Politics of Poetry":

WRITING AND POLITICS

Capitalist ideology hopes to dilute or deny the existence of anything other than the everyday given. By doing so current ideology stagnates thought, replaces the possibility of change with the statistic, frozen black on paper, legitimized by its very inertia. In rendering present social structures "natural" ideology underwrites their "immutability", whether in terms of some kind of metaphysic or positivist scientism. (... or in what is the sociological equivalent to scientism, it promotes all reality as relative, hoping to defuse all social idealism.)

If only as a language that is other, a language outside the pervasive ideolanguage of advanced capitalist society (which once having classified & defined, seeks to box in, contain) free language exists in a critical relation viz.

capitalist superstructures. A language of the word instead of the worded, predigested, fabricated; accepted fact. It's perhaps as simple as saying anything to make one think & examine. The degree to which language is self-concerned is the degree to which it remains unimplicated (?).

Having said this, there are a few important qualifications to the above. For me any critical theory must of necessity exist within revolutionary praxis ... neither the primary component of that praxis, nor servant to "practice". Whether the establishment of a revolutionary counter-hegemony (Gramsci) is a precondition for social transformation or not, once critical theory has become detached from practice (or at least the struggle toward a program for action) it becomes merely another academic discipline. Scholasticism drained of any real social content, ready to be taught at the state u.

Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual is helpful here. The organic intellectual was one who, unlike the traditional intellectual, was not a sub-class unto himself, separated from everyday life. "Theory" was not directing practice from above, but the self-expression of the proletariat's everyday struggle. (This shouldn't be taken as an argument for some sort of Gramscian orthodoxy. For starters, the whole concept of "working class" has become problematic forty years later.) ... Concretely, it would seem to me that all revolutionary critique must begin (attempt to) with an extensive analysis of class relations within present-day society. Who, what or where are/is the revolutionary class(es) in the USA today? Critiques for their own sake obviously don't make much sense. Criticism becomes revolutionary at the instant it somehow manages to come to grips with this question.

Inman: Address revolutionary politics via statement I made in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*? Sounds like a stretch to me. At least no one can say I've changed my distrust of academia. I suspect, Aaron, that you're focusing in on the second part of that statement which

dealt very cursorily with the relationship between theory & practice—something we were still talking about in the 70’s—and attempted, as well, to insert some acknowledgment of class issues into the forum; not that other writers weren’t talking about class analysis at that time. I’m pretty sure that a large part of that statement was made in the context of some of the “new class theories” which were being formulated around that time. In the 60’s you had, in France, Andre Gorz & Serge Mallet speculating about the emergence of a new, better-educated & technician working class which was pushing for self-management (aka. worker’s control) at the point of production. & in the 70’s Alvin Gouldner & the Ehrenreichs (Barbara & John) brought their own new class theories to the table. Gouldner’s theory, in particular, shifted the emphasis away from traditional working class issues toward a theory of the intelligentsia which had little if anything to do with what was traditionally considered to be the point of production. Gouldner was writing about universities & R&D departments, not factories. Whereas someone like Gramsci had considered intellectuals to be a free floating class fraction, Gouldner speculated that they comprised a new class of their own, mainly by virtue of their shared ideology—what he called a culture of critical discourse (CCD). CCD was, at least to the class members who bought into it, a discourse-for-itself, distancing itself from both hegemonic & other counter-hegemonic ideologies. It was a discourse of shared competence & professional specialization; in other words, a modernist discourse. One of the inevitable effects of CCD was the distancing of new class members from former class allegiances. CCD also

represented a move away from an overtly political practice toward a more culturally-directed one; something which made many on the left who were otherwise attracted by the idea of intellectual empowerment uncomfortable. I found the parallels between CCD & the kind of “specialized” writing some of us were doing at the time striking. (We’ll leave aside issues of my own writerly competence.) I’d just written *Platin*, a 20 page piece which contained very little standard English. There was a way in which you could look at *Platin*, or Melnick’s *Pcoet*, or work that Coolidge, Andrews, Darragh & Weiner were doing as literary examples of CCD—products of a very specialized literary sub-discourse, accessible only to a small group of fellow practitioners. On the one hand Gouldner’s concept of CCD justified such specialization by placing it within the context of an overall counter-hegemonic movement. But on the other hand, it underlined the lack of a direct connection between the kinds of stuff I was doing & leftist praxis. So the statement is working its way through a certain amount of guilty conscience. In terms of the kinds of discussions being held within the pages of L= it seemed like it might be time to start talking about grounding “the theory” in a more overtly political—that is Marxist—context. It was only beginning to dawn on me that any relationship between *Platin* & socialist politics was going to be an overdetermined rather than direct one. No doubt reading Althusser over the next year or so turned on some light bulbs for me. Reading him, in fact, was nothing short of revelatory for me. His work, along with some other Althusserian texts—Macherey’s *Theory of Literary Production*, Poulantzas’, work, the essays on film appearing in the British magazine

Screen—provided me with a means of bridging the gap between my own “specialized” writing practice & leftist politics. For those texts at once: (1) provided a particularly coherent articulation of the connections between Western subjectivity & capitalist reproduction; (2) paralleled, through their anti-humanism, my own distance from the mainstream poetical modes of expressionism, witness, personism, etc; (3) “licensed,” from a staunchly Marxist perspective, the production of a relatively autonomous art; and (4) proposed that theory (read: “writing” in my case) be internally driven, that it be immanently rather than empirically verifiable, productive rather than reproductive of some exterior & logically prior reality. My own theoretical underdevelopment when I wrote that statement notwithstanding, some of my concerns seem to have been relevant. We were just about to enter the wonderful 80’s, a decade where “class” started to drop out of an alarming number of personal & professional vocabularies. Ditto my reservations about academicism; the 80’s being that period when the idea that writers & other cultural workers should attempt to subvert the academy from within became increasingly accepted. This was, after all, precisely what Gouldner had advocated.

Issues of smart money aside, though, I still stand by those concerns. It does seem to me that the assimilation of “language poetry” into the academy has had the effect of at once deoppositionalizing the context in which the writing is read & commodifying the texts themselves by converting them into units of academic cultural capital. & the tension, or contradictions, between a cultural & overt politics are still very much present in my work.

Although I'm now inclined to think of that tension as one of the more interesting features in my work.

Vidaver: We'd like to turn to a closer examination of this contradiction with reference to particular pages from your eleven books. But first, could you say more about this "pre-assimilated" context of the reading of your writing? What exactly were, or are, the terms of this oppositionality? Also, didn't these texts become commodified as soon as they entered the market as published books with exchange values?

For example, this afternoon as I'm searching the inventories of rare-book dealers for Tuumba volumes (US\$107.00 for a Lyn Hejinian, \$51.95 for a Ron Silliman, \$36.95 for a Bruce Andrews, \$15.00 for a P. Inman, \$10.00 for a Lynne Dreyer—which makes one *Ocker* equivalent to two-fifths of a *Praxis*), I recall a pleasant experience of purchasing a copy of *Red Shift* at the Simon Fraser University bookstore in 1995. The book had five price tags on the back (covering-over the biography) \$7.98, \$3.49, \$2.65, \$1.49, \$1.19 Cdn—that's US \$4.98, \$2.18, \$1.65, \$0.93 and \$0.74 in today's currency exchange.

Or are you referring to a different sense of commodification here? I think of one piece that has been written on the topic: a passage from Jeff Derksen's *Culture Above the Nation* where he argues that "the fragmentation and the resistance to normative modes of meaning production make *Uneven Development*"¹

¹ See: <http://www.princeton.edu/eclipse/projects/UNEVEN/uneven.html>

unrecoupable into the culture-ideology of globalization.” Hmm. Is this the notion of commodity-resistance and oppositionality that you have in mind? At the level of the poem’s “semantic uselessness”, “rejection of representation”, and “sheer materiality”—or something else entirely?

Inman: I hope you bought *Red Shift* low because the market value is about to shoot through the Roof, no pun intended... There’s at least two questions there, right? OK, the oppositionality would be ranged against, on one level, the institutionalized practice of litcrit typically produced from within the university & on another, more generalized level, against what Jeff Derksen refers to in the above quotation as the “culture-ideology of globalization”. It wouldn’t be aimed at enlarging &/or reshaping the literary canon, which seems to be the focus of so many critics & poets these days. Nor would it seek to situate itself solely within the “mediating institution of the academy itself” to use Alan Golding’s turn of phrase. Canon reformation really doesn’t, in & of itself, necessitate any kind of institutional changes within the academy. What it does involve is a different list of proper names being injected into the litcrit exchange system; curriculum changes, in other words. There’s a lot to be said, to use Ron Silliman’s well-known example, for getting Joseph Ceravolo’s work acknowledged & more widely-read. But what can’t be said for it is that it constitutes an institutional critique of (much less changes) the university. Canon reformation might constitute a threat to various entrenched careers, but it’s difficult to see how it would constitute a threat to the reproduction of capitalist ideology

within the university. According to a *Washington Post* article published about a year or so ago, two of the five top real estate holders in the Washington D.C. area are Georgetown & George Washington Universities. Here in the States the big universities are major financial players. Contra Gouldner's CCD, the source of the university's enormous rate of return isn't its fostering of critical & independent thought—the source is its ever-increasing role as a capitalist public-relations support system. The university really functions as a kind of apologetics factory. Like any other “first world” big business, the university attempts to convert everything on the periphery into some kind of resource; into intellectual capital as it were. In the cultural departments raw material (writings, paintings, etc.) will be emblemized as demonstrations of cultural vitality. Literature departments (if that's what they're still called) will select “specimens” of minority writings into their curricula so as to validate claims regarding American multiculturalism, pluralism & so on. The names on the reading list change, but the concept of the reading list itself doesn't. It would seem that texts which enter the curriculum really undergo a process of double expropriation. Firstly, the writer loses “control” of the text upon its entry into litcrit discourse; secondly, the reader's reception of the text is always & already incorporated into & directed through such discourse.

So, let me answer at least one of your questions, Aaron. Yeah, the pricing of *Ocker & Step Work* is an index of the kind of commodification I'm talking about... In 1978, one year before the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* “Politics and Poetry” issue came out, the British socialist Ralph Miliband distinguished between what he took

to be the two major strategies for change being adopted within Eurocommunism. The first, dominant strategy, sought to transform capitalist society by working within existing state structures. The second strategy advocated the construction of parallel networks of conciliar & grassroots organizations which would operate “alongside the state and independently of it.” Miliband’s point was that it was only through the second approach that the groundwork would be adequately laid for both the eventual dismantling of the capitalist state & its replacement with a democratic, socialist one. Parties & groupings trying to operate solely within the existing state structures would inevitably find themselves locked into ever-diminishing cycles of reformist (vs. revolutionary) measures. Twenty-three years of increasing globalization (read: U.S. imperialism) later, Miliband’s point seems even more valid than it did then. If one accepts the validity of transporting his political analysis into the cultural arena, the crucial question with respect to a strategy of changing the university from within would become whether, after fifteen years of infiltration, academic discourse has become more supportive of literary practices outside its sphere, or whether it doesn’t still suppress or colonize such parallel practices. My impression is that the latter remains the case. What we’re really faced with is the fact that, in the U.S. at least, the academy’s structure & resultant discourse are so imbricated within capital’s overall structure that political change would have to precede rather than follow upon any substantive change within the university. So that, under the present state of affairs any thoroughgoing opposition to capitalist hegemony would be emanating from outside of the university ISA.

PS (12/25/02). Do I need to add that, unlike some, I don't consider the above to be an ethical issue? "Ethics" makes me want to wash my hands. To put it more baldly: choosing to teach at a university isn't a question of selling out. It's a strategic rather than an ethical question.

Farr/Vidaver: Perhaps we could back up even further, chronologically, to the early 1970s. We're still hunting for a characterization of the autonomous moment that may have existed prior to this absorption you're describing. Was there some agreement among writers in Washington DC (circa 1969-1975) regarding the problems of counter-hegemonic writing, resistance to institutional recuperation and, most importantly, the fashioning of co-operative non-state models for poetic production? Were Mass Transit, the Folio reading series, and Some of Us Press instances of parallel networks?

Inman: I don't think there were a hell of a lot of people in this country who even knew what "counter-hegemonic" meant in the early 70's. But your question deals with successive, rather than overlapping, poetry scenes. The Folio reading series started in 1976; whereas Some of Us Press & the Mass Transit reading series were going on in the first part of the decade. Be that as it may, I don't remember there being any hard & fast consensus about "what was to be done" within either scene... In the early 70's it seemed like there were cooperatives everywhere you looked. In

DC there were several food coops, a free health clinic (where I served, remarkably enough sans incident, as a VD counselor), a legal aid coop, child-care coops, etc., etc. It was the heyday of the American counter-culture; not to mention the period during which the New Left imploded. The whole country was laced through with alternative demi-institutional forms. Both SOUP & the Mass Transit reading series were very much a part of that milieu. Mass Transit was held at the Community Bookstore, the leftist/Whole Earth clearinghouse for the greater DC area. After an evening of versifying upstairs you could check out Mao's red book or buy a Che poster downstairs. SOUP was run collectively by a group of between six or eight people, depending upon who was abroad in Morocco or Nepal at the moment. I was never a member of the collective, but Tina was. Michael & Lee Lally were the dominant organizational forces in both the press & the reading series. What political consensus there was in SOUP was largely constellated around sexual politics (in particular gay & lesbian politics) & the proposition that "the personal was political"; thus the autobiographical, direct nature of many of the chapbooks the press published. SOUP & Mass Transit overlapped with SOUP's collective forming the reading series' core group. The predominant aesthetic of the series was torqued toward a combination of New York School poetry (O'Hara & Berrigan especially) & feminist poetry (Robin Morgan, for example). But things were flexible enough there to accommodate other kinds of work to the aesthetic right & left of, say, O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*. Tina & Lynne Dreyer were both already doing overtly experimental work at that time. The tenor of

both the press & the series was non-academic & non-establishment (to use another archeological term). SOUP was particularly concerned with distributional questions—with the setting up of an outlet for non-academic, alternative work. So to that extent SOUP did create a small, localized area of counter-hegemonic distributional practice. The problem was that the writing itself frequently replicated the formal & thematic concerns of the mainstream work being published by Atheneum, Wesleyan & the like... The Folio reading series, run by Doug Lang (a Welsh expatriate & poet) was a different kettle of fish. It was an excellent & intelligently put together reading series—in many ways it was the model for ensuing innovative series—but it was never counter-institutional in the way that the Mass Transit series was. That fact was probably as much as anything a direct reflection of the ongoing hibernation of leftist politics in the States during the late 70s. It reflected as well the intensified cultural administration here, which was alternately & sometimes coterminously fueled by cultural pluralism & cultural fundamentalism. The Folio series ran 1976-1980 & was shaped by Doug's wide-ranging interests & tastes, which ranged from Black Mountain (Fielding Dawson read) to still-evolving "Language" (Lyn Hejinian read as well). Folio exposed those of us who attended to a mind-bending concentration of avant-gardist work—this was, of course, before us Americans had been schooled by Lyotard, Baudrillard... et al. & learned that things like history & avant-gardes had become passé. That brief period was crucial to a number of us; both to those of us who were pretty well launched toward a more exploratory writing & to those of us who

still needed a few more nudges in that direction. Once the series folded a small group of its attendees formed an informal reading group. Again Doug was the prime mover in starting these sessions up & keeping things percolating. Let's be historical & name some names: Doug, Lynne Dreyer, Tina, myself, Douglas Messerli, Joan Retallack, Phyllis Rosenzweig, Bernie Welt, Terry Winch & Diane Ward. For at least some of us, at that period of time the politics had moved back into the writing practice & away from the institutional framework of such practice. So that, indeed, we were by that time thinking in terms of a counter-hegemonic writing practice which was more involved with point-of-production issues than distribution or reception. Certainly, I don't remember much group talk about an engagement (or lack of) with institutionalized practices, but I think the thought of being a Yale younger poet or being published by Atheneum or Wesleyan remained as alien to us in 1978 as it had been in 1972. There was a sense—for some of us at least—in which “institutional recuperation” was a non-issue, i.e. you wrote the way you wrote & no institution worth its salt would want to recuperate you. One's practice was a passive negative resistance, if you will. My memory is that these assumptions, when shared, were largely unspoken & untheorized ones. Some of us, of course, had by that time done some serious woodshedding with Critical Theory; more of us, I suspect, had not. In truth, Tina & I were on the fringes of the Folio scene from 1977—the year our son was born—on. We spent the bulk of 1977-1978 in Champaign, Illinois & once we moved back to the DC area in '79 were a little too absorbed in matters of domestic survival to be heavily involved in

the literary scene. So I can't say for sure how much of the above is based on shared group currency & how much of it represents hallucinatory extrapolation on my part. For responsible & accurate reportage of the "facts" I'd refer people to the DC Poetry Oral History web site.²

Farr: I'm curious about your sense of how the politics moved into the writing practice during this period. What aspects of your attention changed, specifically? (Actually, that word "attention" is a topic in itself, cf. Dan Farrell's remark "What's the difference between what Inman writes as stopped attention, ~~on a social scale~~ and stabilization of meaning, on a social scale, necessary for social cohesion?"—maybe we could talk about that later too...). But in terms of the politics/writing practice question, we notice that there are distinct formal differences between the two compositions of 1974-1975, *What Happens Next?* and *P. Inman USA*, and "Islip," "TPD," and an early version of "Lotioning" appearing in 1977—i.e. the sentence gives way to the phrase; the writing appears to become increasingly focused on the semantics of the phrase, working up or out from the phrase as a "basic unit of composition." Is this description correct? We're looking at such passages as:

It was morning. I turned over & fucked a discarded
orange rind. The come mingled with the lipstick message
you'd left on the outside of the rind. Your name, signature
bled its own obsessive, tiny light.

— "These Things We All Love to Remember," *What Happens Next*

² See: <http://www.dcpoetry.com/>

The woman stood up with the yams. She held names in a gingerly way, as if they were reptiles. She dropped the lets into her flat reach, reaches of passion & the undeniable of it all. She snapped in his hand, hugging the lifting until it suspended him... Names were reptiles.

— P.Inman *USA*

Sank according to an Act of Congress. A mime of one's self, gliscerated more than a time. Semi but on paper. (Voice tutelage.) Defoe starts implying more below. Weather straightenings, too spook ups. Gether. The dill seen through Sunkist slats. Any mesh texture proof.

— "ISLIP"

Clue foil. A buy of paste. You cue a sameness of choice, "Pal Joey" stucco. Bodying one among, the sides rule up. Not all kinds of sweeps, what follows on not depending. A gel of story. The fill out on youth.

— from "Lotioning" [1977]

Inman: Your description seems quite accurate to me. During the 70's my work underwent a series of syntactical reductions. As you say, it progressed (some would say regressed) downward through the syntactical chain from the sentence through the phrase & then further into the abyss of the sub-word or non-word. The progression mimed Clement Greenberg's proposition that modernism entailed a progressive rejection of inessential media conventions until you finally got down to what was essential about painting, or sculpture, etc... Painting no longer needed the easel, it no longer had to be concerned with the illusion of depth—on the contrary, what it really needed to do was assert its own flatness... Up to that point the

plastic artists had been more radically reductionist than the writers, of course. I'm actually pretty fuzzy on when I became conscious of that analogy between what was happening in painting & sculpture & what was beginning to happen in writing. But certainly by the late 70's & early 80's I was more focused on how those issues were playing out in painting & minimalist sculpture than in writing. The artists were more advanced. Between the writing of *Platin* & *Ocker*³ I began, in characteristically literal-minded form, writing words inside lined "sculpture shapes"—simple shapes, mind you—nothing an Olympia portable couldn't handle. Very little of that stuff survives (archivists take note). Magazine editors tended to find it incomprehensible or worse... Actually, Tina analyzes one of those pieces in "Pi in the Skye" & at least one of them was published locally in a magazine called *Dog City*... Writing "Lotioning" was actually a pretty drawn-out process. It was written between '76 & '78; a pretty long time when you consider the piece's length. The draft you're quoting from actually appeared in *Roof IV* as part of the DC writer's section which I would refer folks who are interested in what kind of experimental work was being done in DC & Baltimore at the time. The final version of "Lotioning" appeared about a year later in *Roof IX* & pretty much tracked the end of that progression from phrase-oriented units to stuff which worked at the level of the word (using the term loosely) or below. By Section 4 of the *Roof IX* version the language has jumped track, syntactically speaking. The words (or non-) don't point outside or beyond themselves as much

³ See: <http://www.princeton.edu/eclipse/projects/OCKER/ocker.html>
<http://www.princeton.edu/eclipse/projects/PLATIN/platin.html>

as they just name themselves. There's not a heck of a lot of connective tissue between one unit & the next & by the end of that section the words are "prophylactically" parenthesized, walled-off from the other words around them. In that sense, some of my recent over-punctuated work represents a return of sorts to the concerns which cropped up in that piece. My sense was that the phrase mode had already been covered by writers like Coolidge & Andrews & I found myself bumping into too many things outside the process itself. It seemed prudent to take the next step by pushing things down another level, syntactically speaking. So, no, Roger, the formal shifts weren't politically motivated. They didn't result from some conscious decision on my part to move away from an institutional critique—implicit or otherwise—on to something else. Rather they were the result of a decade-long period of compositional trial & error. One of which produced an awful lot of disposable work, some of which you've quoted from above. The political ramifications of moving into the text didn't dawn on me until later—I was, quite simply, too busy working the compositional stuff out. In terms of consciousness, the aesthetics preceded the politics & the guilty conscience I referred to when talking about the L="statement" basically reflects that gap. Be that as it may, by the end of "Lotioning" my focus had become totally centered upon what was happening within the writing process itself. I was attempting to bracket out everything that wasn't immanent to the writing itself; or at least attempting to see how far I could push that. To some extent I'm still doing that, I just don't think it can be pushed as far as I did then. My sense of what "the process itself" might be is a little more

mediated than it was at that time. But even at that point I wouldn't have denied that there were political & ideological implications flowing from such an internalized process. I've always held out the hope that one might be able to abstract a politics from such a process. Even a leftist one. One way to do it would be via tinkering with an Adornian aesthetics of negativity. That is, a negativity which brackets out capitalist ideology & coalesces around the space created by that act of punctuation. I mean there's a sense (utopian) in which such a negativity creates a structure of its own, with its own structural integrity; a vacuum (momentary) in the shape of what's (ideology) been evacuated. The political problem involved in such a project would be how to reinsert the idea of a collective agency back into the equation. The fact that Adorno despaired of such a possibility doesn't in & of itself preclude reestablishing such a connection.

Farr/Vidaver: How then did you conceive of the units existing below the level of the word? In "Lotioning 4", just to stick with that piece for the moment, there are a variety of non-words present, but they are different from, say, the non-words of *Pcoet*:

Lotioning 4

th,tauk,eath. eaoatr. sawed ackpequer. gadgilm. no owny other ... dark, iform. eakill. iefly harding. irr. memb. ince. frore. (id,ribs) broice. teif. finally wordace. caffrey tiln, voice. sujees poor (wootgleam). ficter. opceer stick. eance.uit,taste. ftegether. cloughlin. (...ed) trell illief. east,eath. ield eprieve. fauciped meer,poil. paitcinct. form pull, cava'd. am ederb. eathq.

harb.apter. heathered matthau pakes...tanect,atc. humb. eorm allow.
mood of tilk. ecates taffy oin. ache,struct. oitm. opia. fring lie treat. pict.
from. ankle,ilv. wome,ecteds. soft tance,jeel. still amber eqoit. pacit.
eamless iloquoy. spackain. umbrim peop. heighv. am hobbled iota, tepip
per. camaw as make. ledg,boa. parpy be, (to keep rubbery calm).
iscuit,jaw. (cit.) eried char, meld,say icagoans. tol

praxef.

uke. augme. viewwth,phoned brams. beamed prees enorming read left.
banded oper. speaw. igit. thraspy eeclove. util. (even) foibalm. the wall
loivt. contc. ibbonedwet. taug, stic. oped,auv (wiface). amber keep.
egend,oam. ixity,ecade... muncer. send lacks it nimb. oet ec,take. pakled,
who lore her beige. could coped,oic. spteach. kebab-deep, teem their
due. mlobe. immed,empt(mempher). leit red.

ealth,per. cact-armed iface. ain,uch.

cauld,owe. tabasc,eat.

sawthed. iet,baise.

stenc,irror. laid,anding.

chawth,white.

quiet.

mantbleu, secu,ib,umbwiet. feat,eac,eeling.

plastill on. speift.

mouth in, troit. lid,istle. sat,obv.

oftpree. glazieftalc.

somat askp. inge euilt.

cloise,nib. bisq.

ribble. plaqerk.

bracsp. ceid,oeuf,loet. seaid. ithpr.

lay, equ. facsim, oel.

specie toec. shape, cetate.

ettuce. struther eagram.

wire thode.

pear, ... inct. sest, egit. other, oethe.

tierct. stoay, ew.

ome, the, featc.

speave onnectedly. brai, eadbr.

wem, auth. ieform.

telact, inaspc. laid icant. tofoise.

piecblew. quet, scie. tillble. escu, oad.

oft, eam. ime, b. hesive, eid.

spee, act.

bibb placer. pell, druft.

thorch, ribbed, ief.

spaw, mealm, asper. saroy, br.

leam secoit. trofef.

indice, ecilled. it cripp.

uneif. lid, ulsted. theateif.

illow, struct. awnace.

ealed. sequoi.

brairn mache. (skewtf...) spathe, iouian.

iel, bumen. pour, webst. langed, walk.

erriff. ceol pliney. offee.
verb ilever.
tinct,mojav. tallow clued ill talp.

tauk,ethpage.
spun,ictive. (filteith?) etein,par.
fll. (lasper) eighfer. (oakprague.)
parmic.

eamid lincidence. cran-bring follow.
newted glass. methilt. (pucep.) hairp teas.
fit,ixxed. pictainly. onmout,awled.
steroipv.
ilveref cope. edfe.

painp. brile female.
semastic egger (nomened) pieage.
pencht. thivk.
larm tile.

ceid thank. adobv.
coleem meet. (paper pemmed learn.)
oneid. meln voice.
toice,rim.
enam. ioca.

legged zack.
wyomif (frilmic), (figu pills). (eidet,jaw) suff,iscrim.

heisen,grow.
wence. skifpps. wrap qua wrap
lamed,join,craced. ottaw,mean.

ear peack. doubtfv ... qwra?
edifs. siln person.
trambulb.

(pucep.)
gilm percif. grim,bevacq(,braill(ap), (ef). chews,join,emact. railuevc.
sevil me. heavight how tate. leawalk. tuscaror,schwitt.
eadtquilk. seper. utic,slabs.
viemew,(entirf). palmyre. (,plumb,ouache.)
vassar tiered enter (,necco,ikaner.) (sill,)nive(a),(ncif)
urbed quiesce. ofcoa. skill(f per.)... mazy.
(tunis van clee(ldsp,quid)f.) caifc.
etcalfe. telt,tastrophe.

ome,erce. (who hum college).
simu. sedget. (smalting "spinac leaner", powde,mott.)
(folb...mel) "jam betty". errain,leads.
ont pipes? sit at my ex-desk. grow-
ive. ed,biewv,ocould. touchup,linse.

weaffle,sainsp. antecce. skibbed,tinct.
seriomile. eirch. eilv,awe(,pectady.) quids,kick,(clust)ap.
bubbed drop. (vanil,ipstei.)
leab,otif. (oilc?) (glaskp?)
briceper. lantered cran. (.pacine,celeb)

tonaw eplace. peor. bword. spellpime (cubic,paraffe.) coetate.
(ec,bue)

(lakaw,cobrillie)
(opieba) (keepap)
(uicked,tamime)
(ec,pice.) (mized...) (cetera)
(errat,crull)
(tenci...) (peor)
(irstic) (moil,silo)

(aspeb,trough)... (memb ince)
(plause,adpolk) (mimmer) (catid,instea)
(fen-brilliance) (cullef,moines) (ewr...culel)
(fill,paquiv)... (tormoh)... (hobnef)
...(icit) (ircui,offsit)
(thek) ... (cag)
(lactsit,situ) (lambled,mophe) (liq,brackive)
(luci) ...(olk)... (t)(fulse) (paign,beloif)
(naph-in-lee) (occic) (instame,eiparver)
... (luid)... (othk,crowb) (hibbed,elena)
(wabe,persq)
(soa,ehemp) (leatif)... (timbed)

(lux,ecrae) (boolean a talk peru) (ocraw) (engt)
 (sinef) (mance,pauv) (bethan,linth)...(keoku) (spindly macon)
 (pekiv) (semu)
 (stomence) (ing,fiel stritch)
 (giot)... (haliber)
 (toerwink) (izzorn wetk)

These units all have an insistent morphemic presence, don't they? They read as remnants, clippings, or distortions of what were words, once, rather than as accumulations of alien phonemes or unspeakable, unpronounceable, graphical elements constituting a "pure music" or "pure painting." Second, don't these non-words also point (outside of themselves, into the social world, with big fingers) to the words they could have been (their bloated ideological doubles), to those elements within themselves that still contain residues of ideological functions (and thus to the overall role of language in the reproduction of capitalism), or to what *should* be?

Inman: Right, pronouncability or the lack of it. That's what struck me when I first read *Pcoet*—that & the fact that it was an amazing work. One could read just about everything in "Lotioning" or *Platin* aloud, but large stretches of *Pcoet* seemed to escape speakability. Its text seemed to be situated totally on the surface of the page; it was more like painting than music in that sense. Melnick seemed to be writing letter by letter, whereas I was going syllable to syllable, phoneme to phoneme; on some probably non-locatable level sounding things out. For me there was always that little hum going on beneath or above the page. In "Lotioning" I think you maybe get

a sense of that from all the aural & visual internal rhymes in there... “eath,” “eaoatr,” “eakill,” “eance,” etc. Or eatc. I think the rhyming is bound to jump at the reader when really small units of language are being isolated...

OK, so much for self-inflicted close readings... How did I conceive of all that rather strange stuff? It's probably easier to start off with what I didn't conceive it as. I didn't conceive of the language as being non-English or as part of some incipient new language, e.g. “zaum.” For me the language did remain English-bound, although there were also some other languages in the mix as well—a lot of Native American (or Europeanized, “pidgin Indian” versions of same) place names that I'd culled from various places... Another writer once introduced me to someone as a “neologist” & I remember being vaguely surprised by that characterization. I didn't see myself as generating snippets of some new linguistic currency. I guess I didn't see the vocabulary as having the kind of permanency you'd need for that kind of project. It seemed like it was more occasional than that; the units fit in where they fit in & then once you left the piece they were gone. You know, they didn't have enough longevity to become units of linguistic currency. One of the reasons I eventually moved back to using “dictionary words” was that I found myself repeating “made up” words, falling into patterns, developing a repertoire of “vocabulary tics.” It seemed like that kind of repetition really did head things back in the direction of creating some kind of private mini-language & I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to keep what was happening inside the work at hand, whereas building up some kind of repertoire immediately threw

things outside that internalized frame of reference into issues connected to authorial subjectivity. Nor did I think of the writing as depthless or “horizontal” (see: Andrews, “Text and Context.”). It seemed like Ben Friedlander’s characterization of it as “reverberal” fit, though my sense of the locus of those reverberations was no doubt different than his. For me the analogy was more along the lines of an analogy I think Coolidge used in an interview somewhere—that of a high school chemistry experiment with a whole bunch of molecules inside a test-tube bouncing off each other. Not that I thought language, even made-up language, could stay that sealed-off. Nor that it could, as you put it, purge itself of ideological residues. So, yeah, I agree with you: no matter how defamiliarized, the language in “Lotioning” does point outside (& despite) itself. As does the language in *Pcoet*. The “otherness” immediately highlights what it’s not. It throws you back upon what it isn’t doing. Back upon, as you say, the overall role of language in the reproduction of capitalism. There’s always going to be that social thickness to any terminology; the kind of accretion that Benjamin & Williams, in very different ways, draw our attentions back to.

But I’m wondering if the pointing you’re referring to isn’t uncovered during the reading of “Lotioning” rather than during the writing of it. I guess I’m suggesting two things in relation to this, both of which were more or less taken for granted in that prelapsarian world before postmodernism. Firstly, there remains a distinction between writing & reading; they remain separable moments even if they are, as I believe, dialectically related. I’m

suggesting that the whole business of making the material production of a text one link in a seamless chain of readings—of textual reproduction—ends up losing much more than it gains; that once that distinction is lost production tends to drop out of the equation entirely. Every act along the line becomes one of reception. The loss of the distinction between writing & reading makes the writing of “Tender Buttons” an act of consumption rather than production. It ends up locking “TB” into an endless exchange system: one where you really can’t trace the money back to its (deferred, of course) source. There no longer is any point of production, just one transaction begotten by another. (Voila, Post-Fordism.)

Secondly & relatedly, I’m suggesting that the difference between practice & theory needs to be retained rather than jettisoned—that the two modes are dialectically & synchronously related to each other but nonetheless & necessarily distinct. Pierre Macherey reading “Mysterious Island” is different from Jules Verne writing it. The pointing you refer to needs to be drawn out, abstracted from the text—especially from texts like “Lotioning” or “minus.” The relations in those texts remain, at one level, materially within them. I’m tempted to say that in the early works such as “Lotioning” or *Ocker* the material is self-protectively non-theoretical; an act of self-protection which no doubt ends up protecting theory as well!... Uh, what was the question again?

Vidaver: Let me rephrase it. In asking about “pointing to what should be” I’m hoping to get a sense of how this writing is

assembled into “a negative, insubordinate space within the administered space we’re all daily subjected to,” as you specify it in a previous interview. Three quotations nag me: the blurbs by Rod Smith (“We need to learn to live like these writings.”), Bruce Andrews (*at. least.* “arranges tantalizing raw (& V-effected) materials for us to construct (& live in) a life, a milieu”) & Bob Grumman (“Trust me, with time and the whole sequence at hand, one can learn a habitat from [Inman’s poetry].”).

Farr: This is curious, because pointing to a utopian space of potential inhabitation returns us to *zaum*, to Futurism (in fact, Douglas Messerli invokes this very art-historical context on the back of *Red Shift*). Isn’t the “should be”—the negative potential of the non-word—the same utopian modality of poetry that Bakhtin attacks in *The Discourse of the Novel*?

. . . the language of poetic genres, when they approach their stylistic limit, often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic, and conservative, sealing itself off from the influence of extraliterary social dialects. Therefore such ideas as a special “poetic language,” “a language of the gods,” a “priestly language of poetry” and so forth could flourish on poetic soil. It is noteworthy that the poet, should he not accept the given literary language, will sooner resort to the artificial creation of a new language specifically for poetry than he will to the exploitation of actual available social dialects. Social languages are filled with specific objects, typical, socially localized and limited, while the artificially created language of poetry must be a directly intentional language, unitary and singular. Thus, when Russian prose writers at the beginning of the twentieth century began to show a profound interest in dialects and *skaz*, the Symbolists (Bal’mont, V. Ivanov) and later the

Futurists dreamed of creating a special “language of poetry,” and even made experiments toward creating such a language (V. Khlebnikov). The idea of a special unitary and singular language of poetry is a typical utopian philosopheme of poetic discourse: it is grounded in the actual conditions and demands of poetic style, which is always a style adequately serviced by one directly intentional language from whose point of view other languages (conversational, business and prose languages, among others) are perceived as objects that are in no way its equal. The idea of a “poetic language” is yet another expression of that same Ptolemaic conception of the linguistic and stylistic world.” (287-288)

I’m wondering if the turn away—if that’s what it is—from those languages (“dialects”) that are more organically linked to the social life of language under late-late capitalism, in favour of a “negative in subordinate space” that points, via a process of abstraction and condensation, to what it is not, doesn't somehow end up sealed off, “pure.” Or maybe this is missing the point—that such writing is, in some important way, linked to the social life of language.

Vidaver: Which pieces of linguistic matter might count as social?

Farr: Bakhtin says “conversational, business and prose,” but we might also add slang, argot, pidgin, late-night radio... the anti-social life of language too.

Inman: I certainly don’t see my work as participating in the model of “poetic language” Bakhtin debunks. I don’t view poetic language as some sort of *uber*-language set over & above conversational, prose or popular languages. It’s not either Hannah Weiner or Ken

Loach, either “Fear of a Black Planet” or Steve Benson’s *Back*. They’re in different parts of the building; they do different things with respect to hegemonic discourse. There’s more than one way of keeping the work indigestible. The connection Bakhtin draws between authoritarianism & singularity may have been totally apt in his framework, but seems rather outmoded now, at least in this rather thick neck of the globalized woods. The linguistic margins aren’t being dissed out of existence by “poetic language”—they’re being ingested by the culture market. The prevailing flavor of authoritarianism in the center is systematic rather than particularized, held together through a series of institutionalized linkages & transactions. Yes? To me that indicates that there might indeed be something to be gained from disconnecting prefabricated linguistic units, from trying to maintain linguistic integrity at the level of (each) word. Maintaining “singularity” is one way of not getting sucked into the whole exchange-driven idea of lexical interchangeability.

So, the answer to Roger’s questions—or at least my answer—would be “both.” The language in *amounts to* both approaches an area sealed off from capitalism *and* attempts to recoup subaltern social meaning. Firstly, the attempt to seal off the text would constitute a refusal, insofar as possible, to reproduce the linkages of capitalist reproduction within what one writes. Writing which is effectively unhooked from an exchange system based on “flexible”, interchangeable units doesn’t aid in the reproduction of cultural capital. Such writing doesn’t do the affirmative work it’s being paid (albeit rather meagerly) to do. It doesn’t underwrite buzz

concepts like “democracy,” “creativity,” “pluralism,” “industry,” etc. Sealing off writing would actually be less a retreat into purity or the literary than a cultural work action, a culture factory shutdown. You know, the culture workers take over the literature plant & either shut down the metaphor machines completely or reset them & continue production under a new set of self-managed textual relations. Perhaps the blurbs you’re quoting are picking up on that utopian impulse—the idea of rehabilitation, of retaking space. In any event the forces & relations would be sealed inside the plant. Of course in the world of real factory shutdowns, like the General Motors sit-down strikes during the 30’s or the Lip watchworks occupation in France in the 80’s, such work actions have proved to be unsustainable. Understandable enough in terms of the social forces massed against the strikers, but nonetheless in terms of my own scenario, a problem, I’ll grant you. Thus my use of the word “approaches” above. At this juncture the creation of a sustained (vs. fleeting) non-subordinated space really exists only as sort some of asymptotic limit. A work like *Vel* doesn’t create such a space, it only reiterates its absence. It seems to me that only a political rather than literary revolution could actually create the possibility for such a space.

Secondly, I’d maintain once again that all writing is linked with the “social life of language.” All linguistic matter is social. Even *Platin*. Even the lamest self-help text. Language’s sociality encompasses more than just the set of dominant discourses. Or the delinquent languages Roger lists: “slang,” “argot,” etc. In fact, in going through your questions, it occurred to me that it might be

more interesting to look at “avant-garde writing” as a kind of slang or argot, rather than, as I suggested before, a kind of intramural-level CCD. “Argot” might be a better way of foregrounding such writing’s peripheralized status vis-a-vis triumphal global postmodernism—“avant-gardism” having been outsourced along with “progress” & “history”... It seems that the attempt to seal off one set of linkages & effect another would be impulses shared by many radicalized cultural practices—that those impulses are the contradictory (to use the term in Mao’s sense) moments of a single movement *away from*. The emphasis on pushing out or pulling in would be differently inflected in, say a Gang of Four song vs. a Susan Howe poem (d’ya think, Pete?) but the push & pull would nonetheless be there in both.

Vidaver: What about the presence of the many proper names in the poems? Reading backwards:

amounts. to: De Niro, Goodman Brown, French, Berkshires, Howard Beach, Holbein, John Stuart Mill, Waverly, Baffin Bay, Leninist, Edison, Pinter, Poulantzas, Lenin, Roanoke, Sandino, Sunday, Lake George, The Party, East Kent, Robert Bolt, Wilkie Collins, Rothko, Bettelheim, Bolsheviks, Beckett, Shakers, The Party, Maigret, Hilton, Zukofsky, Andalusia, Hudson, Milton Babbitt, Pacific, L., Eisenhower, Lake Erie, Melnick, Maoism, Anselm, Peru, Thelonious, Stein, Atget, Henry James, Pcoet, Bienno Rosso, Susquehanna, Stella, Coleridge, Talmud, Vermont, Lawrence Co., Memphis, Spring & All, O’Keefe, Gotha Program, Joyce, Stein, Emerson, Little Walter, Diderot, Braxton, Kline, Lacy;

at. least: Annette, Ives, Ives, Bufferin, Métis, Tuckahoe, Luxemburg, Charles Ives, Tworkov, Stroszek, Gorky, Cherokee, Frankfurt, Chet Baker, Agnes Varda, France,

Poor Laws, Kaspar Hauser, Catskill, Catskill, France, Wolcott, French, Lutheran, Goodman Brown, Frank Norris, Kaspar Hauser, Inca, Goodman Brown, Colo., de Kooning, Vermeer, English, Lake Champlain, Billie Whitelaw, Cezanne, Frenchness, Black Hills, Cezanne, Cherokee, L'Estaque, Stein, Gide, Lord Franklin, Greeks, Rhine, Hudson, Beowulf, Shirpa, Mohawk Valley, Shenandoah, Beethoven, Marline, Bingham, Genji, Sherman, Andes, Andes, Calderon, Isenheim, Hawthorne, French, Sikeston, Webster's, Mazatlan, Pacific, Augustine, Pacific, Catskill, Plains, Vermeer, Kaspar Hauser, Augustine, Beethoven, Marne, Hudson, Hudson, Fleming, Gorky, Eskimo, Cezanne, Cezanne, Chinese, Hopper, Peru, Brazilian, French, Peru, Pacific, Giotto, Black Hills, Kahlo, Frida, Erie, Charles, Hudson, Kelvinator, Trotsky, Revlon, Canada, Balzac, Hopper, Sonny Sharrock, Petersburg, Isenheim, Hornsby, de Kooning, Cherokee, Cherokee, Cezanne, Vermeer, Wales, Vespucci, Maine, Catalan, Hudson Bay, Chardin, Nahautl, Maynard Keynes, Baptists, Erie, Arctic, Cezanne, Montana, French, French, Pacific, Hempstead, Long Island, Balzac;

VEL: California, Métis, Giotto, Calvin, H-Block Long Kesh, Russian, Dutch, Inca, Comanche, Guinness Book, Rhine, Byzantine, Matisse's Woman in a Red Blouse, Holland, Plague, Hemingway, Rhode Island, Gabin, Herzog, Rizzuto, James Taylor, Pittston, Jack Kerouac, Wagner, Paterson, Great Lakes, Cotton Club, Inca Younger Poet, French, Susquehanna, Graham, Dick Powell, Flint, Baptist, Neruda, Hanover, Catskill, Mex., Paulist, French, Gorky, Sandino, Harlow, Gide, Robert Johnson, Stein, Monet, Mexico, Montauk, Geronimo, Rothstein, Andalusia, Ford, Montauk, Lot, Ohio, Fletcher Henderson, Strindberg, Wales, Trenton, Villon, Irish, Charles R., Cadillac, Austria, Hudson, Shannon, Colgate, Charcot, Beethoven, Black Hill, Wagner, Inca, Berkshires, Pascal, French, Rhine, Beowulf, Oklahoma, Black Hills, Scandinavians, Wisconsin, Augsburg, Mon Oncle d'Amerique, Strindberg, Monk, Norwich, John Dee, Amish, Catholic, Beethoven, French, Coleman Hawkins, Asian, Cherokee, Curtis Faville, Foxrock, Dublin, Wisconsin, Shakers, de Kooning, Tennessean, Andes, French, Black Hills, Harry Bridges;

criss cross: Jack, Williams, New Hampshire, Cowper, Monet, Joan, Follette, Aleuts, Buffalo, Rameau, van Gogh, Mohawk, Rembrandt, Arkansas, Gramsci, Lenin, Asian, Canada, Tina, Deppe, Natick, Dreyfusard, Quaderni del Carcere, Absalom, Dutchman, Liffey, England, London, Shriner, English, Naples, Leveller, Colorado, Keats, Alaska, Goodman Brown, Cortez, James, Coeur d'Alene, Baader, Blofeld, Orkney, Philip Evergood, Tosca, Plimsoll, Bath, Julia, Rexall

Red Shift: Robert Mitchum, French, Lotioning, Gainsborough, Cezanne, Memphis, Old Crow, Emily, Crashaw, Riemann, Turner, Euclid, District Water, Stein, Say, Ozarks, Ornette, Arabic, Nebraska, Cain, Minsk, Protestant, Pondicherry, Cimabue, Constable, London Broil, Magic Flute, Serpent Mound, Luxenburg, Plimsoll, Depression, Robert Johnson, Enclosure Act, Essene, Hilton, Beowulf, Black Hills, St. Cloud, Atlantic, Orinico, Montana, Leipzig, Kickapoo, Peking Man, Fermat, Protestant, Bishop, Camera Eye, Lange, Harry Bridges, Bank of Morgantown, Dust Bowl, Earl Browder, Wichita, Sand Creek, Trotsky, Liberty, Almeria, Carl Hubbell, Farrell, Rivera, Lenin, California, Ohrbach's, Amish, Lake Superior, Evans, Panhandle, Amish, Baker Library, Panhandle, January, Carnap, Franciscan, Post Wolcott, Boulder, Steinbeck, Odets, Trotsky, Norwegian, Whitman, Malraux, Man's Hope, Lima, Dziga Vertov, Hilbert, Nebraska, Clean Water Act, Sparrow's Point, Scottsboro Trial, Gide, Franco-Soviet Pact;

Think of One: Godard, Zukofsky, Chardin, Lot, Wolfe, Judd, Beowulf, Hawthorne, Luxemburg, Gris, Palestrina, Ponge, Marx, Hatteras, Eluard, Tierney, Hachette, Olitski, Breton, Naville, Tupamaro, Browning.

This list leaves aside the paratextual naming inside the books: the dedications, acknowledgements, and notes. Aren't these words more obvious instances of specific objects, socially localized?

Inman: That's quite a list... "Socially localized" seems like a good way of putting it. Obviously, a lot of the personal & ethnic group names you've listed bring some overt sociocultural baggage along with them. "Poulantzas" & "Inca" aren't innocent names, they're almost citational in effect. Dropping "Poulantzas," or "Judd" for that matter, in the middle of "n.b." is like making an appeal to authority. "n.b." is an extreme—rather atypical for me—case of what I'm talking about. Written in 1998, its constant reference to Marxist/Leninist figures & terminology came about largely as a delayed reaction to the disappearance of that range of discourse from the political sphere. It was my way of keeping the Red Flag waving, or at least unfurled. In the midst of this fairly formalist, non-representational piece was this rather loaded, nominative sub-vocabulary which carried a lot of associations along with it. Something to grab on to at last. "Dust Bowl" was the other piece where there really was a decision to denotatively load the work up. The names in there were all culled from books about the Great Depression; the great majority of those named were either Communists or fellow travelers. Naming "Harry Bridges" & "Earl Browder" torqued the piece in a very definite, if also esoteric to some, political direction. & that was the intention in both pieces, of course. But I wouldn't want to be understood as saying that the act of naming names represents some sort of primary eruption of the political into the text. By my lights "kilter," which has one "political name" in its 12 pages, is every bit as political as "n.b." One might say that the act of naming—of referencing—is the least political aspect of the work, in that it tends to foreclose the collaborative

possibilities that texts like “n.b.” or “kilter” present. Moreover, aside from their referential function, the profusion of names throughout “n.b.” alters the way the nouns function in the piece, multiplying subject positions rather than unifying them. This is, however, less a function of whatever string of extra-textual associations a name like “Earl Browder” might have, than it is a function of the name’s structural position in the piece itself. It seems to me that any suspension of ideological effects springing from my work would spring more from its technical aspects than through its appeals to any outside political or aesthetic authority.

Farr: Could you say more about the “structural position” that the proper name occupies? And something about neologisms? As a “class” of language, the neologism seems much less productive (in the sense you refer to earlier, where words are “not doing the work they’re paid to do”) than other units of language, such as the proper name. The neologism as an exemplary insubordinate at the vanguard of the slowdown.

Inman: Maybe if I put it this way it’ll be a little clearer: the structural role that names in general play within the signifying chain is perhaps of greater ideological import than who’s being named. It’s by virtue of their functional assignment within the signifying chain that nouns & pronouns serve as points of entry for the reader into the work. “Jane” marks out, locates, a subject position “inside” (character’s) or “behind” (author’s) the work which the reader can insert themselves into. Such a role is obviously linked with the

ideological effects clustering about subjecthood, i.e. about the construction of unified subjects. That construction is effected through the identification of the reader (or viewer, or listener) with subject positions within the work, whether those positions are fictional, authorial, or other. The reader identifies with “Jane” or “Mark Strand.” Texts implicate their readers into a series of ideological transactions—readers are substituted into the text, their own subjective presence is concretized within the operations of the signifying chain. As well, the fact that the reading subject finalizes the text—that she is the locus of its summation—further buttresses the reader’s sense of her own subjecthood. Texts hail (to use Althusser’s oft-cited term) their readers through series of technical effects. They mimic & sustain capitalist ideology’s interpellation of the individual subject. As far as shoring up ideas of subjectivity goes, nominatives do a lot of heavy lifting. What I was suggesting, in that context, was that the requisite lifting power doesn’t derive from whom is being named (“Adam Sandler”) as much as from how names (any names) function as components of a signifying chain & what their role in such a chain is. To hearken back to my first answer, it’s not a personnel question, it’s a question of functionality. Thus, for example, a multiplication of subject positions might act as a source of interference; it might aid & abet (one can always hope) the dispersal of a unified, anchored subject position within the text. There’d no longer be a “one to one” relationship—which is ultimately one of substitution, one of fabricated equivalence—between reading subject & grammatical effects. It’d be the number of names, not their loadedness

("Gramsci"), which'd help fudge up the works. In the sense that names enable a series of subject position substitutions they're like money or, more precisely, like monetary denominations. They're part of a larger system of transactions in which something can always stand in for something else. A system where particulars are leveled into units of equivalence. Where the flow is from the particular & material to the universal & abstract. Neologisms—by their very nature units of non-equivalence—would be one source of resistance to such an upward flow. Vis a vis systems of equivalence they'd be, as you say, less productive. To the qualified extent that they stand for themselves they're non-negotiable & therefore of little or no use to any kind of exchange system.

Vidaver: I have two clusters of questions, Peter, regarding interpellation and your sense of the role of punctuation within the process of interpellation. First, do you conceive of your poetry as counter-interpellative in the sense of disrupting an ongoing and regulatory interpellation of the subject by capitalist ideology (as an attempt to refuse the hail through "dispersal")? Or, alternatively, as instances of constructing a different mode of interpellation of individuals by texts, as something other than subjects (the "collective possibilities," "multiplicity of positions," or a new form of agency)? Or are these are both aspects of the work?

Inman: Yes, they're both aspects of it: I see the work as at once disruptive & productive, anti- & counter- interpellative. If that sounds contradictory, it's of course meant to be. To quote Lenin, as

Mao quotes him in “On Contradiction”: “Dialectics is the teaching which shows how opposites can be and how they happen to be (how they become) identical—under what conditions they are identical, transforming themselves into one another—why the human mind should take these opposites not as dead, rigid, but as living, conditional, mobile, transforming themselves into one another.” I should say, however, that I don’t view the work’s disruptiveness to be primarily an effect of “dispersal”... As far as constructing a new form of agency goes, realistically I don’t think that any kind of cultural practice—even one less marginalized than writing—can in & of itself construct a new form of agency. As part of a larger counter-hegemonic formation a writing might participate in such a construction, but on its own, which is where my work is at least, it just don’t have the juice. It seems me that a new collectivity could only *result* from an extended series of sociopolitical changes. I don’t see artworks initiating new forms of agency ahead of those changes. I’d be happy to be convinced otherwise...

Having said all that, however, I’d venture that there are productive aspects to the work. Obviously, at a most basic level, any time there’s a mark made on a page, something’s either being produced or reproduced. As well, the evacuation of ideological effects—no matter how momentary & minimal—does produce a space in the text & therefore the “promise,” to use Adorno’s term, that another series of counter-ideological effects might be placed within that space. OK, boiling it down further: work which doesn’t, by its very nature, pre-empt the possibility of a new mode of interpellation is productive. Secondly, it seems to me that the

structural concerns which are foregrounded in my stuff necessarily operate outside of an exclusively negative practice.

Vidaver: My second question, then. In addition to the roles or functions of the types of words we've been discussing, do you feel that your punctuation contributes to this non-negotiability or non-equivalence? While the backslash in *Red Shift*, the quotation marks in "my drift," or the em dash in "across" seem to demarcate "intuitive" phrasal units, the open parenthesis in "stead", for example:

a coal weem (the
could be (middle fraser
Monet as boundless. (of
jointed anomaly (a matter.
ended o'clock of fay
to it. (newt slum.
rices on a page (lost talk
memphis (by talk.
each to their appease

the colon in "glimpse" :

nelk:
my: eye: itched: flat:
the: grass: it: slends: behind:
tip: of: the: tongue: flooded: by:
tack: steck:
emptied: bird: punctuation: rules:
some: content: left: from: temper-
ature: along: one: woman:
flak: of: footsteps:
sounded: ball: except: everything:
roe: distinctions:

& the period in “kilter” :

cat. tle. end. ed. somew. heres. my. ha. nds. flav. ored. fro.
fr. om. saun. ched. foot. fall. blan. ches. of. par. ts. so.
co. al. dic. tion. the. ed. ge. a. ro. ck. has. of.
fall. blan. ches. of. par. ts. so. me. gee. se. supp. oses.

what. the. daybreak. would. seem. thin. to. get. through.
an. Eskimo. his. mind. lost. than. ketchup. rate. is.
is. what. opens. up. space. from. imperialism. rice. dots.

seem to operate according to a very different prosodic form. Your note 12 in “Notes on Slow Writing” comes to mind: “Overpunctuation as one available strategy. Its dual effect to at once contract & expand the reader/writer’s focus upon the text. 1) to contract: to slow down the text, to counteract the socially constructed tendency to move through the present word to the next as quickly as possible (read ‘Taylorism’): to skim over, to scan: to reach the end; 2) to expand: to cut the reader/writer adrift in the text, to neutralize punctuation’s directive function & thus leave the length of each phrasal unit undefined: so that at any one point on the page one would always be in its midst.”

And during the Phillytalks discussion you commented on these two points in reply to a question from the audience—“I think a lot of us were probably dissatisfied with the Olsonian line of breath. What my work has dealt with for a long time is, well, how do you organize things on the page? I think what happens with the use of periods is two things, as I said in that statement. In one case

it is a signal to slow down—it would be different from having no punctuation, which I think, inherently, given our attention spans in the late twentieth century, is, to emphasize, speed reading. I could be wrong, but that’s how I read something without periods. But on the other hand, it’s almost a negation of any cues in terms of how one is going to make the connections between the units.”

In the course of the subsequent conversation the first of these was treated at some length. But the second of the points wasn’t. Would you elaborate upon it? I’m worried about Dan Farrell’s worries about thinking of this focus as a space for “individual contemplation” or “the creation of attention spans.”

Inman: Well, yeah, that’s definitely part of the game plan. The overpunctuation is intended to ratchet up the non-negotiability of the work... from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E to L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. ... some people probably find it pretty annoying too! As you say, overpunctuation works to frustrate phrase, not to speak of sentence, oriented readings. If it doesn’t totally negate the phrasal possibilities in the work, it certainly takes away any direction as to how the individual words in a given piece should (or shouldn’t) be grouped together. The work in *Vel* is almost programmatically non-directive in that respect. Punctuation marks are supposed to function as traffic signs. Slow down, stop-go. They’re supposed to regulate the flow. You know, in that sense they’re like all the other regulatory apparatus controlling the flow of production & reproduction—“instead of putting a dash here we’ll raise the interest rate or build more infrastructure.” But having periods

everywhere, rather than strategically placed, jams that function. It devalues the period's "cueing" function. The period or comma no longer aids the reader in deciding how they're going to manage & group things. So that, in addition to a slowing down of the writing's pace—which some might see as authoritarian—there's also that anarchistic component of non-directionality happening... If anything overpunctuation aggravates the contradiction—the push & pull that's present in the reading of any text—between the vertical & horizontal aspects of the works. The vertical movement within the writing would enact that tendency which at any given point in the work wants things to stay put; wants to dig into the layered accretion of social usage which each & every word recapitulates. Whereas the horizontal movement would enact the impulse to continually push things along; it'd represent that formal element of structuration that will always result in some kind of connectivity, some kind of move toward overall shape.

It seems to me that each textual vector might be further subdivided. The writing's vertical vector might encompass negative as well as positive moments. The vertical's positive tendency would encumber the productivity I mentioned above: it would be the impulse to mine levels of social usage, to dig in. Whereas its negativity would play out in the resistance to being moved along, to being sucked into the forward movement of exchangeability. Likewise, with the horizontal axis: its productivity would push things along toward some kind of structure, toward some finalized shape (or in some of my stuff shapes plural). Whereas its negativity would

play out as formalism, as the kind of writerly immanence I was referring to earlier in the interview.

So, the positive & negative tendencies along each axis invert the positive & negative tendencies along the opposite axis. Too overly schematic an analysis for me to pass up, I'm afraid. & of course, putting a punctuation mark after every word isn't the only way of putting such dynamics into play...

As far as Dan's concern about "the creation of attention spans," which Roger also alluded to earlier on, I think Dan may have been querying whether or not I wasn't positing yet another species of romantic contemplation; whether my insistence on slowing things down wasn't some rather distracted, or maybe abstracted, version of stopping to smell the flowers. As I commented at Philly, there are ways in which Dan's suspicion that I might be harboring a latent romanticism might be valid—for me as well as for modernism in general—but I don't think the production of attention spans is one of them. I think attention spans are a good thing & am even prepared to write a straightforwardly declarative sentence about it. It's hard, for instance, to envision Althusser's theoretical production without the use of one. & besides in my case we're talking about very tiny attention spans, aren't we.

But more importantly, I remain convinced that there's a fundamental connection, or set of connections, between capitalist reproduction & the ongoing drive to speed perception up. As Jonathan Crary demonstrates in *Suspensions of Perception*, cultural formations have played a pivotal role in shaping people's perceptual range & speed; in pre-conditioning the citizenry's ability

to merge into capital's fast lane. Speed isn't just an accidental byproduct of technological "advances;" it facilitates, crucially, capitalist development & globalization. The efficiency of the multinationals have always hinged on their ability to move currency, or product, or labor forces, or material resources from one place to another as instantaneously as possible. There's a direct line connecting the shrinking of distances through the age of exploration, the transportation revolution, the proliferation of telecommunications & computer usage & the successive entrenchment of "market" forces. The faster things move the stronger capital's stranglehold on the planet becomes. & useful & productive citizens need to be able to keep up with the flow. Impressionism, montage, all-over paintings, virtualization have progressively positioned us into taking in things at once, into eliminating the distances between one thing & the next. So I'd be more inclined to see the attempt to slow things down in terms of an ongoing attempt to put some of the distance between words back in. To rematerialize those erased spaces; to insist upon re-establishing their material territorialities.

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