

Transcript of March 5, 1998 talk at:
Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, Philadelphia 19104

Joshua Schuster: This introduction begins at the end, as my last literary event that I am hosting at the Writers House. This introduction starts at the beginning, the opening of a friendship between two poets, meeting each other for the first time. These two poet's writings know each others writings, but, as writers, they have never met each other before. So this introduction will help place them in the middle of an event where they will begin their conversation together, reading as a kind of sharing, reading from the midpoint in their lives and careers. This middle is guided by what Ammiel Alcalay highlights as "specific history", the living history of details and particulars, specific and special, taking place at a certain moment inside what we have named the Writers House, within a tradition in tune with John Zorn's assertion of Radical Jewish Culture, up to the tradition of what has no tradition – unique histories, specific and special, intimate and singular.

All specific histories are haunted, that is, created, by a series of questions, triggered by the one question that questions itself. This question always begins by saying What if... asked just at the moment before possibility that makes possibility possible. In most cases, it is an unacceptable question, just like this is, in most cases, an unacceptable introduction.

What if... I gave an introduction to an event that never happened?

What if... we started a project at the University of Pennsylvania called the Writers House, and held a reading series for experimental writers, and somehow you heard about it, and you came to hear it happen?

What if... sets a specific history, as in Ammiel Alcalay's book of poetry *the cairo notebooks*. Alcalay writes: "What if either of them, now that it was over, the mother or her daughter, should appear among the faces that passed before him?" (6) This question marks the return of a memory, a relationship which the speaker can only partially recall. Yet the very question of possibly running into this other person in a crowd leaves the memory incomplete and living.

Reading Ammiel Alcalay's book *the cairo notebooks*, this question I quote would probably be hard to notice, since it is a relatively calm sentence compared with many of the more painful and disturbing moments to which Alcalay's writing acts as witness. Most of all, Alcalay's question in *the cairo notebooks* is not whether there will be change in the Middle East, or in our memory, but how this change will take place. But because change is never determined by closed

relationships, Alcalay's work still finds itself intimately involved in questions of how to survive, redeem, recuperate, and revive the past which is always in the future. In Alcalay's writing, such questions trigger the intimacy of memory which is at the heart of the violence of change.

This memory, this question, this What if..., this open sense of specific history, runs deeply into Tom Mandel's poetry. The intensity with which these issues are dealt with by Mandel evokes both closeness and resistance; some of Mandel's poems are defined by being out of reach while others are defined by their very reaching out. In one case, this dynamic is found in the same, single question, like the one placed in the first poem in Mandel's recent book *Prospect of Release*: "To whom / now do I belong?" This is the unacceptable question, the question which is too close and too far, the question which questions itself. Perhaps to ask this question is to take the first step to belong outside of belonging. This question is re-asked several times in Mandel's book, affecting his memory and his ability to answer:

Often I ask a question whose answer is
known, question praising answer in advance.
To whom now do I belong? Distant,
flattened against the horizon of a past

more or less forgotten, recalled only
by these words describing it, no more
than nouns alter, verbs change only.

[from *Prospect of Release* (Chax, 1996), 57]

An answer is followed by a question which is followed by a triggering of a missed recollection, a memory that is defined by our forgetting of it. Is memory out of control here? Our memories live us, and they outlive us. We can't help but live in the time of memory, a kind of haunted time in which something that happened 15 years ago is always closer to us than what happened 5 minutes ago. I want to say right now we live in the Era of Memory, such that memory has become an art. But this occupied time of memory is no guarantee that the project of human memory will not be abandoned in the future. And our memories won't absolve us.

This question marks us, in the way that memory is kept alive by questions. As the question marks, it

becomes part of what Jacques Derrida calls the “community of the question”. This is the community that always questions itself, and for me, as part of my interest in a specific history, Derrida’s “community of the question” evokes the Jewish question, the question of remainder, the question inherent in every word. Tonight, Ammiel Alcalay and Tom Mandel will conduct their talk as a movement of questions for each other. After their talk, You, as audience, can move this community by asking questions.

I want to finish, to give up this too-long introduction with a sentence by the poet Paul Celan which connects these rather abstract thoughts to the immediacy of Alcalay and Mandel’s writing. Celan writes: “Reality is not simply there, it must be searched and won”. [Wirklichkeit ist nicht, Wirklichkeit will gesucht und gewonnen sein.] Nothing less than reality is at stake in the writing. This “community of the question” is my reality — I leave it to the rest to determine its imaginability.

All this will be my way of introducing Ammiel Alcalay and Tom Mandel.

Tom Mandel: It’s a great pleasure to be here, as it was a great, great pleasure for me to get to know Ammiel via email and a cup of coffee. I just want to thank very much all of you. I will read for a few minutes, then Ammiel will read for a few minutes; then we will ask each other some questions, to which the answers will be us reading and speaking. From there we will take it into questions from you. And I want to say the questions we have for each other are also questions for you, so when you hear them, please think about them in that way.

SEMAHOT You, you and you I have made, like statue by bronze, sonata of Brahms. The dot at the heart of a letter marks its door. Open this door and enter the letter. A twisted wire chair and a small round table, very much like a café table, occupy the center of the darkness. Atop the table a single candle sits in its plain and common stand. Finding matches in your pocket, you light the candle, which gives off a yellow, uncertain flame. The smoky light flickers. Such a jaundiced color may not be pleasant, not for long, obscuring more than it reveals. You wet your fingertips and snuff the flame, leaving a film of wax on your fingers, and a smudge of carbon. The feel of candle wax on your fingers, it is uncomfortable, it is familiar. A coil of dead smoke lifts from the blackened candle-end to curl its acrid scent around your nose and irritate your eyes. You rise from the chair and walk into the deepest part of the letter. Although no source of light is apparent, you are able to make out your path and so must conclude that a manner of light extends from you. That you should be the source of such illumination – low,

even, inconclusive – frightens you, yet you seem to adapt yourself to this idea almost as you think it. By now you are leaning all your weight against the letter’s farthest wall - the pleasantly cool, slightly bumpy surface of a nameless substance in whose anonymity familiar feelings rise. Ear against the wall, you sense something beyond it yet way inside you about to speak. Although at no moment do you fully understand what is said, your eyes close in effortless concentration. Intently, you listen. (Tom Mandel, 6/6/90)

Ammiel Alcalay:

trust the least
desire imagine

light together
gazing at bottles

floating in the port
pushing against a

time we imagine
years further

spinning leaves
a bed a pillow

our park just souvenir feathers drawn across states skin
taut across manifest destiny listening ear to the ground
for what isn’t there evidence of beauty evidence
destroyed everywhere desire and hunger taxis with
amulets evoke wounds across time within earth
underground too slow to penetrate too late to spawn
such a chaste upbringing such sheltered accents for no
language escapes

gazing at sailors walking through the port dying for
trust together running through the woods as the light
plays through the leaves when you least expect a
burning desire in ways we could hardly even articulate
as if we’d been kids attached to no real itinerary falling
on a pillow of moss your eyes too slow to shelter too
close to part

warm stone cold stone rooms at either end and the room
in the middle of this journey dank and mouldy elegant
and even gentrified now but a poor room a room for the
poor a room to end up in bones creaking and lungs

clogged the hard life embedded in the very body of the city in gold adorned and manner straightforward her head covered like the dome a part of her very body you would have to rip the eyes out of to destroy the memory of “fourteen of us” in this room

in sailing
tempest
river no
river tents
upended

attracted by trollies
desire born of a farther
aqueduct (wind in the
curtains: traffic and rain)

neither owl nor eagle nor deer
only feathers on a souvenir
drum bought from
an Algonquin

feathers on a souvenir drum bought from an Algonquin
speak parking lots and minarets toppled to dust ponds
and rivers Mashpee next to Barnstable and
Sandwich speak for the garbage we help

attracted by trollies a view of the
river imagine escutcheons herald
aluminum arms door knob or handle
either grip the very same even this
oblong sea that ocean grandfathers
on the move underground the bloody
corpse gnawed and nibbled at by
tourists of fortune caution stop
words kill writer ahead by the dead
hand of heraldry of glories past and
yet to come feel the weight of this
token in my hand in yours holding
mine the night the bombing began the
night we decided to kill the garden to
bury Eve forever to starve her children
starve her veiled sisters Night and
Layla who'll never find the prince
that opened a cookshop in Damascus
her groom and lover who left his
turban by the bedside to go to the privy

only to find a hunchback up to his ears
in shit caught headfirst by a demon
lost in a makeshift trial of trials and
tests and travail and wandering in the
whirlpools of space commandeered
by our own obsequious hosts gearing
up at every idle moment to steal not
only life but even air itself don't you
see / we're on the eve of destruction

unlikely
intimate
unraveling
toy wrapping
the daily tide

our park
manifest

disappearing city
injured at the outset astute
observers anonymous random
kitchen speak for the garbage we help

on the river of joy and
when time comes
and on the day of jewels
and upon a crown of wealth
and depths of poverty not
my own none of
this surprise me

she sang

[from *The Warring Factions* (Unpublished)]

Tom Mandel:

The Cave, Part I.

Walking from foreground to another room
foot rises from hard wood to carpet
flexing arch, mind aware
to survive head down
high current of siren south on Mission
among shoppers, idlers out for
an evening, the other side of blinds
solitude alone unequal
to complaint of solitude, a part
of life is spent alone, moving into
the bedroom too early in the evening for lack
of other
amusement – bedclothes on, stuff, spread out, journals
letters to answer, lists, books, a manuscript –
then
TV turned towards the bed
to dine
with Karl Lagerfeld

in the Fendi diningroom on A&E; Karl
 serves himself from a dish as I
 am served
 his image from satellite dish, but in his case
 a servant holds the dish – rendered
 self-conscious perhaps by the camera
 (as I am not) whose
 formal motion tracks the room
 a formal room (as they call one too narrow
 to enjoy the form of)
 frames deep sills where glow candelabras
 flames flourish to fade as video memory
 or in passionless
 low tones of high-toned
 intimate conversation only slightly removed
 from silence, a remove to the distance
 of barbarian chatter, the
 candles sputter, the world outside
 the window dies. Mind alone.

 One cannot put outside events this return to nothingness
 of all events
 an anonymous current
 to invade, not the dialectical
 love of presocraticism, that mind in which
 one thing is another, time a river, space a pool
 an act mimesis or concept a mirror.
 If once all stood and spoke
 why are man and woman now a deity
 whose counterpart we do not grasp, no discourse,
 the counterpart
 or absence in anonymity
 does not stray from the screen to
 face
 an apprehended exterior.

 Heavy atmosphere of belonging to none
 returns in mid-negation.
 Space is nocturnal.
 We are filled as with its content.
 Swarming, illuminated, analytic
 the whole opens
 upon an indeterminate menace
 that threatens our silence with things
 of the day. One more indecency
 unreal
 an invention
 exhausted as the cities of the past,
 and conversation
 idle, well-prepared.

 That paint job
 sure is holding up
 still around after the words of
 exceptionally well
 the ex-police chief
 the head of secret police & of our state
 whose corpse no longer composes a world
 of these things that presage its return
 which are void – dense – Like his face
 a day leers, looks
 to have dealt elsewhere with
 the

subjects of knowledge and light,
 somewhat unknowable
 as how to live, the unknown
 whose history we have shared
 bending shoulder
 to the task
 & knee to the throne, humbles
 head and means no pain. Do you find uncomfortable
 the expression of – (
 In gracious candor, with grave
 Care of no book, you
 Stride straight, back unbent
 Taking care not to spill
 A glass you can't refill.
) – of incompleton
 perhaps not
 the smallest arc of a circle
 but a point whose center surrounds
 us like a milk of the poisonous
 dose of air
 appears foreign to all light seizures.

 In space and light, a hero blackens my margin
 leads back to self. There is no
 sense in this coverage
 that the warplane
 comes all over the enemy
 whose
 territory he penetrates, for orgasm
 is testimony to another's presence
 and only the sick
 and powerful, backed into their corners
 toy with a lover,
 the external world
 is so very to me. Privilege history,
 the personality will make war.
 Nothing can happen while I think,
 or if I touch this point, answer me that?
 We must wrestle Mr. Venn at every point that enters
 the cave, he
 whose protractor
 opens a single gap of
 parts to unfold no whole
 as one theory for knowledge, another
 for truth.
 If not the agent of
 knowledge
 what of the writing agent, simply, what of me? Philosopher,
 sing:
 distant, faithful, formative, central,
 dedicated
 and unknown, language changes before surroundings do.
 Insofar as words are chains they are slaves
 whose light is required to see the light.
 No account has been given for no truth can be
 summarized; & none can be given.
 By a sphere
 (of knowledge, of
 truth)
 to designate which coincides with
 Urgent Wisdom,
 Lapse of Time,

difference between his body and my soul.
Between a term and what it means.

[from *Prospect of Release*, 51]

Remember to remember and never forget
never to forget. I will come to
an agreement with those absent.

*What do you mean by these stones
what do they mean to you?*

The great city you did not build
The house furnished, full, but not filled by you
Water in wells you didn't dig
Trees and vines you didn't plant

are bearing. You may eat your fill

Beware what brings you out of bondage
remember what brought you here

["Fire of Wandering" from *Letters of the law*
(Sun & Moon, 1994) p. 64]

AA: What next? First of all, I'm very pleased to be here and just a very moving introduction by Josh which hit several nails on the head. I just want to say as my own introduction to Tom—I had been somewhat aware of his work, but not fully, and this was a phenomenal choice meeting because we do have many intersecting lines. When we first spoke on the phone, I was struck by – after having gathered some biographical information and realizing we are both children of refugees of different generations – how he answered the phone: "Tom Man-del". As if it were possibly Mandelbaum or Mandelbrot or something else and not "Man-del", and that gave me a very clear flavor of who he is. I wonder what you might say about this accent.

TM: Ah, well, of course, we all learn our names from our fathers and our mothers. I learned my name from my father. I went to the University of Chicago and there was a Mandel Hall, and it was spelled just as my name is spelled. Then I moved some years ago to Washington and there had been a governor Mandel, so in a way I feel like I am taking the minority position even in my own name. By the way, I should say it is an adoptive name. My father died when I was very young and my mother remarried and it was his name, "Mandel", which was given to me. And taking his name, Paul Mandel's name, all the more so was I indebted and inscribed in his pronunciation of it. My name at birth had been Thomas Oskar Poeller. Thomas for Thomas Jefferson, as my parents had just arrived in

this country as immigrants from Nazi Austria and Nazi France. Oskar for my father's father who died in a French concentration camp a month or so before my birth, and Pöller – an o with an umlaut – was his and my father's name. My father Thaddeus who died a few years later. *Tadziu* he was called, for they were Polish a generation or so before Austria.

The name "Mandel" is the German word for "almond" by the way. And the almond is a key entity in the tradition that we come from, one of the key foodstuffs, one of the key shapes, one of the keyholes through which you look at yourself as a Jew. Look at yourself through Almond eyes, as in Paul Celan's poem "Mandorla".

Now I have a question for Ammiel. In a way it is a similar question. Similar to the question of the keyhole through which we look at ourselves. The formal and investigative complexity in your work seem to begin in an experience of being overwhelmed by fact and by historical condition. How does that work?

AA: Historical condition works in all kinds of ways, depending on the degree to which you've been touched or made conscious by it. I think that various forms can also be instructive or transferable or translatable to other forms or experiences. Or not. For instance, some people – let's say, children of Holocaust survivors – might transfer that sensitivity of being different in an American context to other forms of difference. Or it might work the other way, selectively, and become a deeply immovable block towards seeing "others" somewhere else: let's say, Palestinians in Israel/Palestine. I'm constantly holding things in balance, and I guess this has to do with part of what I so often find lacking in many aspects of what passes for American culture, which is a sense of the lack of a historical burden. Not that the burden isn't there – it's just that traces of it have been cemented over. The fact that there are now parking lots over historical mosques in Bosnia or Palestinian villages doesn't mean that kind of thing never happened here. We can see this, for instance, in various controversies about burial grounds, like the African burial grounds in downtown New York, for example. Having been brought up in particular circumstances of enormous historical burden, that tension is always there, in any context. The context is always surrounded by the very large facts or experiences or transmissions that have come to me. In my case, I'm hyper-sensitive to contexts and to things that might be missing in a place or a version of a place or a narrative. It unfortunately is constantly at work in the sense that even coming here to this magnificent, stupendous Writers House, I can't help but think where I was this morning, teaching my students at Queens College who are operating under somewhat different circumstances and could barely even imagine that a place like this

actually exists, or that it might be run by students! Part of the difficulty of working through such a situation is that in a funny way one can have taken this enormous journey and come back to where one started from, which is a very clearly American language and American idiom, and then wonder what happened on the way. What I mean by this is, oddly, something like the following: every now and then I get a sense that I could have simply continued writing, from the age that I seriously began to occupy myself with writing, and continue working out of and through the language and the circumstances given to me without necessarily taking the actual physical and linguistic and cultural and political and experiential journeys back to the old world that I took. But then I read work by people who I think should have known better and realize that I had to traverse those territories, even if afterwards the words I wrote were identical, they would have had to, at some level, be marked by that knowledge. So that coming back for me, to an American idiom, also means opening that idiom up to meanings that haven't yet been expressed in it.

TM: Good.

AA: Speaking of such burdens... or legacies, or inheritances, or baggage, etc., one of the things that immediately drew me to your work was a sense, that I find so rare in the American idiom, in terms of this almond that you spoke of, this "Mandel", of an embracing and a complete internalization of what I have always taken or discovered to be what can be called "Jewish" as opposed to the nostalgic, the outer-superficial facets that are so often served up as that tradition. I wonder if you could say something about how you got to that or how that got to you, and what it means when you say something like "the letter of the law", or the poem that you read last.

TM: Yes, I can. One thing I would say instantly, that we often have a template for experiences, a schema in which first there are problems and then there are solutions, or there are problems and then there are break-throughs, or there are conditions and then there is understanding them. But, I didn't have a problem first. Instead, I experienced a solution. Then I had to find the problem that had been solved..

Here's how it happened. In the mid-80's, I was attending a nephew's Bar Mitzvah when suddenly I heard the liturgy being spoken and I heard it in my voice. Every word in the liturgy was in my voice. All the words in the large room came from inside me. How had my voice had gotten into this ancient liturgy?

I can't say I have quite understood this continuing experience, this phenomenon of hearing in which my voice comes from outside me to be inside me. But I have

been able to examine the very high bandwidth connections between my and the forms of address (this is not a quality comparison) of the rabbis, of the Lurianic Kabbalah, of Spinoza (and I could continue the list). *Prospect of Release* addresses that question, it is in that sense a "specific history" to use Josh's phrase and your phrase.

By 'the rabbis' I mean – and I hope you all know this – those rabbis whose thought, whose conversation over the centuries, was captured in the Talmud and the Midrashim.

I think I can read something that addresses that issue too, that speaks to it. And I would like to.

Here we are and shall remain
after a time, for awhile.

Everything survives its end:
tv shows, cigarette filters, passionate
features bumping against the wet breadth of morn,
an old cracked tea pot, some cabbage leaves, and the
odd tin of jam that's long ago been emptied

these detachments of silence
bringing us to our senses.
Don't take it so seriously, the way to
ruin a moment. Countlessly,
our ears will do the measuring even when
our fingers can't. Pattern, coherence, design
struggle to violate the lack of control

talismans, antivirals, and fetishes
work as well as anything, but differently.
You can't fight a virus like the evil eye,
and the skills needed to survive and sustain
a slow role in a Carolinian lake
haven't yet been discovered. How easy the
antigen. An imaginary black man

is a current favorite.
Irish, Jew, Gay, Socialist
will do in other contexts.
Caution: may cause drowsiness.
Use only as directed.
If you still scream out after you know that there's
nothing to fear, does the stick become a snake?

Does the snake become a tear?
As music deploys itself, running into
the airless air, the sterile ground, a dark night
carves a ditch in the earth, and
in a rush of confidence
pours down the blood of a ram,
shades in the form of mirrors

mirrors in the form of fears
trying to cure a hangnail
by cutting off someone's hand
stop the tide from advancing
absolute certainty, like
the unrecognized belief

in an impossible world.

It's quaint, I suppose, until they drop by
to inform you that you don't ... quite ... have it ... right.
A solution to the problem: policies.

Section 1, Paragraph 5:

"Thes clemly dimpt resam, arl musen aps grends."
You'll want to cede... good for country... lots' a cash...
preborn family values... more guns... lock 'em up.

Ritually kissed on both cheeks,
resistance, the painted lips
falling away from the faces
the multi-lingual screams, like a flag that waves
the frightened, decaying splendor around us
where we still, somehow, construct
the fragrant, fertile streams of language and youth

never forgetting, in the new century
who is the hunter, and who is the hunted;
where the fear is drawn, and whose picture it is;
who are spoken with, and who are spoken to;
whose life rises, and whose life falls to the floor;
what is acceptable, and who accepts it;
who can hear, and who listens as though speaking.

What is there to perfect other than yourself,
arranging the objects on
your desk or in your room – yet,
they vanish, new ones appear
to be dusted between more pressing projects.
Look, the book slides into a spot on their shelf.
Or must I find you instead

fallen among my intentions like rubble
or an hourglass that keeps asking to be turned,
a mental geometry
where ev'ry location is a border too?
Between one person and another figures
a third witness approaching
to remind us when the future arrives as

words spoken by someone else
what sympathies ruled the hunt
what we heard in confidence, and soon forgot
whose tongue turned then, or was stopped,
words slurred, gait canted, spirit spinning awry,
that it's not our life to rise
nor ours to fall. Not to listen. Not to speak.

Estrin's right: Rome *is* a Mobile Home, touring
the centuries. Go ask the Tainos, who
greeted Columbo that fine and fettle day.
But what were you thinking of?
Did you think I'd just disappear?
No, my correspondent. *Is* is what it is,
and I wouldn't deny that.

I'm just resting, hoping to remember it.

It's raining again. I guess it's been a year.
It's so cold here, hard and hungry, thin, bitter
no bounty too perfect to go unnoticed.
We only survive by the thinnest of threads.
"Oh, I want to live so bad,"
he said, with the mountain exploding behind.

Then after the fire, sweet
the rain washes it away.
Simple, isn't it? Seeing
you, the glimmer washed inside,
the rain enveloping me
cannot reflect it at all.
To give, things we are given

are never separated. So how can we
fear to fear? Or misplace what we've been living?
So after the fire love,
warm ourselves in the hollows
the ashes that we have filled
after time, and the pleasures
here, alight where we are now.

Each loss is an object, like Coastanoan
basket craft. For eons renowned for their skill
and beauty, only three examples remain
the art gone with the people.
I have so many questions.
When we broke in exhaustion
he toasted "To Renewal!"

holding his hand above him.
Where do mosquito fish go in the winter?
What evidence exists, of things which no one
alive knows anything of?
If I own a basket, what do I possess?
I heard you read in a store filled with dead things,
But that's ok, not your fault.

I can't exempt myself from my own critique,
anymore than I can free myself from the
corporate spinning sweatshops
and starvation assembly units. I mean,
I shop in that Supermarket to the World
write with power supplied by pg & e
pay taxes for death squads in Guatemala.

I can offer no adequate exclusions;
we are live with the same lie,
breathe in the same atmosphere.
So it becomes a question
of participation and resistance, or
simply participation.
I most heartily recommend the former.

I needn't explain why, yes?
Disaffection is a most terrible act.
It warms the arthropodan gels of the cool,
chilled monster inside us all.
Scissors, paper, rock... measuring the castles
where we build sand, infernos
fired the heat of fire

scarcity built with style
built to last, separating out the lumpen.
At night, when we dream, what time do we dream in?
The future? The past is still here, the present
is always getting away.
Maybe we dream in all three,
coming together in sleep.

It's all part, even the antithetical
though what's not has to play too,
making it and being there.
Never, I couldn't or wouldn't regret it
immense, white nights by the lakes
mesmerizing stream, speaking
about something to be dreamed.

Is the world still glowing?
Is the night still making rounds?
Is something still pushing up ahead of us,
whittling out the unimaginable?
I sit here and sip my tea
the most ordinary act I can think of,
moon spinning 'round my body.

Although what's not must play too
(flipping pages of urgent warnings & dire
predictions – excellent advice that arrives
too late to be of use), the
waves crashing around our feet will not let us
stand at any shore, beyond where dead things suck
watered bubbles through the sand.

Turn and turn it; everything is in it.
Bridge made of cracked glass whose edge
defies you to cross. Winter,
copying in your notebook
the recipe for a color long unseen
amid objects glinting on your desk. Yet, know:
its color may still appear.

Like participation, perhaps resistance
has been forced upon us too.
A double imperial eagle, painted
on the synagogue ceiling
at Hodorov in seventeen sixty four,
nods to power. The hare caught
in its talons pictures power's consequence.

Germans burnt down Hodorov's
old synagogue to the ground;
did the hare escape? A hare
draped o'er the hunter's shoulder, yet Esau was
denied his patrimony,
slumped before the fire and died.
Hare and hunting dog alike, eaten by hawks.

Strange instruments have pierced us
together in an arduous, cursory
course – absent sensoria
that listen in on an unending escape.
Blood in ears, we hear a sound,

we pause. Bounding through grass, we
perfect our misplaced bounty.

It's been heard so many times, so many
ways... ok we'll say it then
in this way. It's only been a hundred and
fifty years or so ago
a period of time that will in fact pass
again I'm sure, in some manner of speaking.
Somebody will be reading something somewhere

and that's saying something, no?
Here, things continue to slip back together
though in a different configuration.
I want to be like a TV character,
though I haven't given it a lot of thought.
I fall in love in my sleep
with women I know, but know I'll never meet.

With a sound intelligence,
and the right environment
you can survive anything
yeah right, bub. Wanna buy a bride, between here
and there perhaps? I wonder what the fare is
in probabilities, one's capacity
of survival, in the mind.

I found an empty bag at my door, a gift
of myself, an accident
a movement of my body
picking it up, finding what I'd never lost.
It seems reasonable to wonder about
the speaker, if you ask me
present thought, future hearer

somewhere a thought between them.
We still drink our wine here, and for good reason
or drank it, I can't keep it straight anymore
who is speaking what to whom.
I'm not copping out; I'd really like some mail
through the pulsating gasses of this screen, or
maybe we already are.

“There” was exile; air was cool, but lay outside
the walls, an instant revived
not by, nor in, memory, not certainty
but plain luck that lets us speak.
An aberrant warmth has fooled
the buds, teased them out onto
tree branches; now they must die. Crocus that pushed

through last week's softened ground this week's cold withers.
We too, constant enough to say our goodbyes
without knowing whom we touch
or what future, uprooted and broken, will
calm the greedy arrogance of our gene pool,
we pull tree from ground and put pencil to page.
We crush the arrogant kingdom in our days,

a shopping cart world, beneath a duct tape sky.
Hopelessly in love forever and always
we've never had much resistance to crushing

except in aggregate, already between
the two of them, soft and hard
and then in uninterrupted whispering
displacing the binary, or including

them. We've given our goodbyes.
At some point, the screen goes blank
absence waxing a discussion, the new moon
here, patiently somewhere else, or just waiting.
I take a breath by my own intervention,
and then forget, continue.
I didn't know where that was

until, handing it to you,
I decided to tell the simple truth
& instantly fell silent,
a voice swelling in broken regular song.
Do you think "something went wrong"
or right? Just one way to write,
in ink powdered or pounded or borrowed bones.

[from *Absence Sensorium* (Potes & Poets, 1997),
120-122, 125-132]

AA: I find some of your poems to be poems I
might have wanted to write but didn't, and I am very
happy that you wrote them.

TM: Thank you Ammiel.

AA: You mentioned wanting to find out why your
voice was in the liturgy. I think I underwent some kind
of a similar experience, but mine was very connected to
languages and places. I want to read two pieces
connected to that. The first is from *the cairo notebooks*:

At the end of the street, our neighbor Shlomi served as a lookout for the
local coke-dealer. His sister worked for the police, as an "administrative
assistant." Once, when I was serving as an interpreter at the trial of a
political prisoner, I saw Shlomi being taken down through the halls in
hand-cuffs. At the *Moscobiyya*, downtown Jerusalem, the torture
chamber 50 yards from the Main Post Office. Naphtali Reubeni, who
lived right across from us, went to the synagogue at the other end of the
street twice a day. He had a son in the army and a son-in-law who came
back and forth from jail every couple of months in a paddy-wagon. His
daughter and his daughter-in-law both had kids named Rachel. Zohar
Argov, the great singer, used to come down the street very late at night in
his BMW to buy coke from the guy who kept Esther and the kids up all
hours. Not to mention Yehezkel, playing *sheshbesh* on his unfinished
balcony, surrounded by cement blocks and twisted steel struts, cursing
every bone in Eveline's body and every hair on her head as the sun came
up and went down. Now I'm on the F train and someone is asking for
money again. It snowed yesterday in Jerusalem and the horses keep
galloping away, trying to defy gravity as they take the turn over the
graveyards from McDonald Avenue to the Mount of Olives.

[from *the cairo notebooks* (Singing Horse,
1993), 69]

A lot of my energies have gone into transmission of
another kind, in the form of translation, which I have

found to be a very important part of my work. This is a
poem I am very close to. I had a remarkable encounter
which kind of places me in and out of time. Tom and I
had begun corresponding and I mentioned dates,
birthdates, and generations. This is written by a very
well known Bosnian poet by the name of Abdula Sidran.
He is a poet who I was unable to get in touch with
throughout the war, for one reason or another, namely,
his apartment was bombed, he got divorced, his phone
didn't work, etc. When I was in Sarajevo last summer,
through a friend I found him and called him the first
evening I got there. I really had no idea whether this
guy knew who I was, or whether he had gotten any of
the work of his that I translated. He picked up the phone
and said, "Alcalay?" And he began reciting by heart a
poem of mine that had appeared about 15 years before
in a newspaper in Belgrade, which was a poem about
Sarajevo. I just got kind of spooked, it was amazing. He
said, "I didn't know who you were. I thought maybe you
were some guy from the 19th Century. Maybe you lived
in Israel..." Which also shows what he was or wasn't
reading during the war, since my face was plastered all
over certain magazines in Sarajevo. Anyway, this is a
remarkable poem of his which is very close to my sense
of that transmission.

Those who pass

to the Sephardim of Sarajevo, at the Jewish Cemetery

by Abdulah Sidran

First of all time passed.
Afterwards we crossed the bridge and the road, by
the gas pump, and there, 'in accordance with
reason,' the sign said **No Smoking**,
with that we crossed the road again at the foot
of Mt. Trebevic, our pace laid-back, afraid
of change, an unexpected shower.

Dead air. Stone and snake.
The congealed chlorophyll of Toledo.
Espanoles sin patria, Spaniards in exile.

Afterwards time passed. We looked each
other in the eye, counting, for
the thousandth time. How can this sorrow
be rooted out of the heart? One was missing: the Lord will
be alone again.

ombre preiado y entelegente / a respected and wise man,
lavrador publico dija i tarde / working night and day for the
common good

Then time passed. We kept climbing,
not counting the steps, till we got to the stone
blocks (does what we miss start here?) –
Jasenovac, Gradiska, Dakovo, Jadovno,
Lobograd, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, peace.

*Clara, no lloras hija mia / Clara, don't weep my
daughter,
No temes la fosa fria / Fear not the cold grave.*

And time kept on flowing. Now doña Klara
was sunning herself down there, in a bathing suit, her
unkempt hair lazily waving: *die Sonnenbrille* (her shades),
Elle,
cigarettes, her Ronson *feuerzeug*, a Japanese
transistor. The heart stopped beating.

*Muy presto te perdimos / We lost you too soon
Caro padre amoroso / dear, beloved father,
yece con nuestra madre / lie with our mother
en eterno reposto / in eternal rest.*

The world is this torch, lit at
both ends. "Thus do we remain alone – dead or alive –
it makes no difference." Is Elohim weeping? Is Adonai
mutely howling? It's already been a while since anyone's
trimmed the grass or the weeds around here. The linden
blooms alone and the walnut tree ripens by itself. The earth is
clean and innocent.

*Madre que non conoce otra justicia
que el perdon ni mas ley que amor
Mother who knew no justice but pardon
nor law other than love.*

Sleep, you who've also passed over for the last
time. Sleep, time will pass. Sleep,
time will no longer be. Sleep, nothing
will be and it will be as if nothing really
ever even was. Sleep, the sky has no memorials. It has
Nothing but a red hole. Nothing That Seeps
Into a Red Hole
That
Is
Growing

AA: That's kind of a show stopper.

TM: Good poem. Good poem.

I want to ask you a question. The word "Rome", to
me, means everywhere where we are. And, to me,
"Jerusalem" means everywhere where we are not. So I
ask you, you are in many places, Rome, Jerusalem,
Beirut, Sarajevo, Cairo, Queens. Where are you when
you write?

AA: Too seldom sitting in a quiet place. But
usually recollecting and trying to catch, in the Jack
Spicer sense, the right frequency on the radio for the
tune to come in. The question of place is something that
has been very central. It is too bad that Gil Ott isn't
here, because it is interesting that when we did *the cairo
notebooks*, he was convinced that all the texts in the

book somehow took place in a space that he defined as
the Middle East. In fact, many of them really didn't, or
don't, in a mental space, or even a physical space. Part
of what I was up to there was to include the sense of
those spaces wherever I was. This is something I've
found to be extremely difficult to do under, again,
American circumstances. I find very few writers who
are able to do this.

I got permission or instruction, in the sense of
Duncan's permission to enter a meadow, through the
wonderful work of Etel Adnan, the Lebanese writer,
who as she says now writes in English and paints in
Arabic. Essentially, she grew up without a language, or
with many languages. These are things that can be seen
as advantages or disadvantages, depending on how you
look at it. Growing up in a colonial atmosphere, with
displaced parents who had several languages which
were not the dominant languages, she ended up writing
in English, and somehow placed herself in American
English but brought in all of this experience. To me,
that was something that was very instructive. It allowed
me to try and think about ways in which places could be
themselves, and not, at the same time. I think there is a
privilege given to place which I have tried to somehow
contest at the same time as I invite and embrace it. And
often in my work in translation, I am almost looking for
texts whose sensibility I don't see echoes of or
possibilities for in an American context – I bring them
in to somehow up the ante of what we think can be done
here. Most interestingly, I think, these texts are not
formally radical in any way but they do present a very
different consciousness about the world and one's place
in it that can serve not only as a sounding board but a
kind of litmus test against which we might measure our
privileging of technical bravado and certain kinds of
innovative practices while considering others retro or
conventional.

So where I am exactly in all of that is extremely
difficult. There have been a number of years in which I
simply worked in translation, because I did not know
where I was in terms of where I would begin my
language.

TM: That's a good answer. How about we read a
little bit, then open it up to questions.

Kerry Sherin: Can I ask a question first?

TM: You certainly may.

KS: I'm just wondering what you heard that made
you say "that's my voice"?

TM: "Voice" is a word that is so burdened with
theoretical, quasi-theoretical, poetic, quasi-poetic
overtones. I didn't mean anything like that; I meant

something quite literal. Maybe I can say it a little differently, because the idea of voice can very easily be confused with the idea of a person or poet having a “voice”, which is a way to eliminate talking about that person’s work and style and method. In a way, the question is, “What did I hear?” The first thing it was was a sound, a sound of a way of thinking. The phrase that I used, that you heard me read near the end of *Absence Sensorium*, “We will crush the arrogant kingdom in our days”, that is right from the Jewish liturgy – a quotation (though in the liturgy it is God being implored to crush the arrogant kingdom). There are actually many things in *Absence Sensorium* and elsewhere in my work which are a way of my trying to bring forward the liturgy to where it can be heard, to where you can hear it, to where you can hear what I hear, or what you hear.

Now, the liturgy is actually an anthology. The standard liturgy of the tradition I grew up in, which essentially is conservative Judaism (which means Orthodox liturgy, translation OK), is largely an anthology of interpretations by rabbis from around the turn of the Common Era through the Talmudic era (4-500 years), though it also includes material from the Bible especially from the Pentateuch and the Psalms. And then there are other layers in the liturgy too. One is a layer from the Safed Kabbalah. A lot of the Shabat (Sabbath) liturgy dates from the 16th century from the town of Safed, where a number of Iberian families wound up after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. In the wake of that wrenching experience, an intense, very beautiful and messianic body of mystical thought arose. The Lurianic Kabbalah, named after Isaac Luria (Ha Ari – the lion) especially glorified the Sabbath and told a thrilling tale of the origin of the world, of the withdrawal from the world which we call creation.

But, I didn’t know what I was hearing that day when I heard these sounds. I didn’t know any of this history or where the liturgy came from. I flew in for my nephew’s Bar Mitzvah. I didn’t understand that I was hearing a history embedded in a text, or people, individuals, an anthology. For me, that day, what I heard was a sound that sounded like me. I wasn’t a scholar, and I’m not one now, nor do I like to pass myself off as one. Which means I can stop reading about this stuff when I feel like it, I don’t have the responsibilities of a scholar. I take it as far as I need to take it. What the liturgy turned out to mean for me was to actually hear a group, a succession of people’s individual intellectual work and poetry, as a community and to hear myself sounding inside that community and as part of it. Now, understand that virtually all intellectual work, all spiritual work, in the larger sense, of that tradition was poured into Talmud, Midrash, and the like; in other words, most of these poets weren’t

writing poetry; most of these philosophers did no philosophizing, few of these cosmologists studied astrophysics. Their secular work was *work*, a way to make a living. Isaac Luria, for example, who to my mind is one of the great thinkers and writers, one of those with whom I would stand and fall, Isaac Luria was a pepper merchant. And, as some of you know, spices were the ‘high tech’ of the time, the adventurous growth industry.

So, the intellectual work they did, which is collected in the midrashim and the Talmud and the texts of Kabbalah and so forth, is *all the impulses of their thought poured into a single vessel*, and that makes it an extremely rich and concentrated brew. I heard myself swimming around, singing in that soup.

AA: To add to that, there is a phrase some of you may be familiar with, Nathaniel Mackey’s phrase (a paraphrase, actually, of Viktor Zuckerkarll) of music as “wounded kinship’s last resort”, which is something that I’ve come back to again and again. It is I think an amplification of an idea that is written about by the great Guyanese writer Wilson Harris when he talks about the phantom limb. Without getting too atavistic, one would have to be kidding oneself if you thought that it would be simple to completely divorce oneself from the past. It is totally by chance, in this case, that we were born where we were. We could have either not been or ended up as anybody else in someplace completely different, in this case because of particular constraints and circumstances. The question then becomes how strong is that pull, and what does one do with it, in terms of how you negotiate resistance or attraction to it. To come back to what you said in your work, I find a very real response to these kinds of things which have a long history. The intricacies, as you said, that have come into your work from this history are quite rare in this context. That is, many people are doing pure schmaltz, on a variety of levels of sophistication. It is rare indeed, to find this kind of understanding of the intent behind those works we now can label “Jewish.”

TM: Well, I don’t know anyone else who has done this, that I have to admit [laughs]. I have written here [reads from piece of paper]: “In your work, formal complexity begins in a state of being ‘overwhelmed’—meaning the world being more than the mind can begin to handle—and that the work of your writing is an effort at developing out of that, a singularity.” Singularity is a term from physics—the Big Bang was a singularity. Singularity is an event that creates laws, rather than obeys them.

Or in this wonderful essay you have called “Understanding Revolution”, which I recommend everybody in this room read, you quote Genet: “a name

which names what otherwise is un-nameable.” That to me is a singularity. That to me is also the work of one model of writing. Maybe you could call it the realist model of writing. It is one which I think we are all inside of. The attempt to register, in some way, or arrive at, a singularity, out of the overwhelming problem that experience presents us.

AA: Can I read from “Understanding Revolution”?

TM: I wish you would.

AA: This is section 6 from “Understanding Revolution” which was first published by Gil Ott in Paper Air here in Philadelphia. Nobody else wanted to touch it with a ten foot pole.

Not sympathy, never pity, but gesture, movement “raising the threshold of the urgent.”²⁶ Public discourse admits a breach grinding off to a halting start. (“Given this sense of a ‘hidden’ community of workers such as myself, I replaced ‘the story of the Revolution’ with ‘the story of turning to words.’ This is not quite the same as saying that my writing became a substitute for political action, or that it is something I’ll do in between periods of political activism. Rather, I think that I format my writing to go in and out of narrative to coincide with the way I respond to any worlded activity...”²⁷). In the dusty thicket intrepid liberty traps light. The discourse AD HOC, active and unfossilized, connected to the actual situation of people put away, assumes and adumbrates a poetics of the real, a politics intensely felt. Tomorrow it will be someone even closer. Submerged in a return that had begun when. And the intention of that desire carried by a language that grows out of itself and is the magic of fully living within the mother tongue: anyone from someplace can feel it, the brutal anonymity. The ripe the ready the soft the naked flesh. Memory of another time. This crowd, these vistas. Not enough noise. Excessively punctual. We are going (CLIPPETY) to the good (CLOP) people of Zamalek: “Saddika puts down her doll and goes to paddle in the canal. Suddenly a cart dragged by an infuriated mule emerges onto the road. The wheels turn rapidly, madly, with a creaking sound. Before Saddika can climb up the slope again, the cart sweeps round, bowls along, passes her, has passed by... There is nothing left on the ground but a few rags, a little straw and some tiny splinters. “I will make you another one,” says Nabila, her elder sister. “Never, never... This is the doll I want.” “I’ll make you another one just like it, with these same rags, this same straw, these same sticks.” “No, no... I want mine.”

With nothing but this little heap of mud and stuff in her hands, Saddika sobs. She will never be comforted:

However, by the middle of the night she has already come to the end of her tears. Astonished and disappointed that her tears should so soon be used up, she returns to the canal and ceremoniously lays the remains of her doll on the water. It floats away, rolled up in a damp winding-sheet...²⁸

²⁶ Quoted from Erica Hunt in a talk given on the panel “Poetry for the Next Society: Design For Continuing Investigation,” at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project; May 7, 1989.

²⁷ Tina Darragh, “Error message,” in *Poetics Journal* 5; p. 120.

²⁸ Andree Chedid, *The Sixth Day*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1987; pp. 141–142.

TM: “Rust On A New Penny”:

I see a freeway and say:

here I will listen to music, in space
sound and original manner, numb

to tiger cricket and hum of wheels
rusty where asphalt meets shoulder, shoulder ditch
or the left lane rubs meridian weeds.

I see the ocean and say:
don’t turn car across median bumps
damage will be done.

I see my wife and say:
in the geometry of mind
each location marks a border.

Long boughs of walnut lean
upon the car wash
luxuriant burdens stripping clean

where ought to be a storm of authors
wounding points in view
bloodletting in the library of results.

I see a beach and say:
here is much space free
to assemble as granularity?

Any instrument to measure me
must be dragged across
a coherent surface, venerated, veneer.

No one with children
with access to the net
creaking in the storm, not silent

can say he is alone, along
odor of tears and family
rose crystalline, yellowed blue,

silver, dressed. Even hunger is
a direction the hungry head in,
breathing delicacy of rough information,

they move in rain past a restaurant
window, sheets of rain
bounce tumble glaze upon

metal convexity, a car.
I see a Lazy Susan and say:
I am a board fitted unsquare

to a deck that’s clapped in wave
in me a gash
of crosscut saw has left

this splinter to catch your flesh
careening in sudden pitch
whoever strides. You must look down

at how it fits
the humid monuments
with senseless smoke on the water.

Exile is this lazy susan
since June. There is a small
portfolio of rusted keys

metal slivers to insert
in inexistent mechanisms
oozing into jambs, latches

until we feel the spine
upon whom unexpectedly
as we thought we were walking

or else digging heels in ground
we find ourselves astride, riding
alongside famous rivers,

mountains of known prediction
eyes ever on a sky
sweet and changing, full of refusal

of whatever we declare to be
wind and root, toward
a small plate upon which

a pinch of pepper and salt
a noble load we tug
and deposit all discomfort

from footfall to follicle
quivers with equivalence
until the creature snorts, asking

where we want to begin? In dream
or with a theme, each word is
better than another. Each

language contends for space to fall
and earth is hewn by chirps
intentions insufficient to part

in mind. Like a big fish
in a silver arc above the mantel
the plow I pull, bright unstained,

from the earth that I may harvest
no first fruit, no offering to contend
with my brother

one with the shape of statement, sheave
in hand, who says here it is,
that must be said in other words

though no word exceeds another,
arms heavy with gift,
edge that returns to him

like a coin gone back to the mint
and all who know me
suffice to whom we see set free.

So, what do you think? got any questions?

Holly Johnson: It seems that one of the things we've been talking about, even in Josh's introduction, is how the frames affect the process, and how there is interaction between the frame and the process. I would like to ask about one of the poems you read first, in which the servant serving Karl Lagerfeld in the frame of the television. The servant is uncomfortable within that frame, feels self-conscious because of that frame, whereas Lagerfeld sort of feels like he belongs within the frame. Is a frame something which makes poetry self-conscious, so you kind of feel like you are in opposition to it, and you are often feeling: maybe I don't belong in this frame, what is this frame, why am I here, I sort of have a reason, but not? Or is it more that the poet is the designer within the frame, and feels like: I'm in this frame, in some ways I've made this frame, I belong here? Is it opposition to something imposed upon you, or are you defining that frame around you?

AA: I always feel as if opposing something, but never poetry. The language really intimately is involved with other languages, that is in my head, or that exists in other poets and hinges on particular syntax or inflection or nuance, so that I feel it is completely self-less and part of something else that is much larger. I'm just catching a ride at certain points. The things that are oppositional in terms of a frame-work, I think, are much more a question of assumptions, in where I decide to begin a work, and how that will question certain assumptions, contexts, and frames. In that sense, it is an interesting difference in our work, in what could be construed as, though I don't know why people would use this word, "political" in my approach to things. I would be very welcome if someone would want to try and define it, or help me to define it. I think I know when it happens, and I think I know what it is, and it has to do with being very specific about who I think I might be addressing, in what context, but it is a very interesting category to try to think of in different ways that it has generally been thought of, because I think a lot of stuff is, in a facile way, called "political". I really wonder what that means. A lot of my work has been an effort to try to maybe re-define that or think about other kinds of contexts of writing in which things might seem to formally be very conventional but are very radical, in terms of the consciousness that they are positing. It is a tension I'm very aware of and interested in, and – as I said earlier – one of the reasons why I do a lot of translating, because I really try to translate works that I would have like to have seen somebody write here, but they can't, or they haven't, or they wouldn't be able to.

[*Rust on a New Penny* is an unpublished poem]

TM: Just approaching your question from a totally different angle. First of all, simply, one modernist idea is to create a frame that is strict and limiting, and then to struggle against that frame and to create a work that functions in resistance to that frame. This impulse is evident paradigmatically, for example, in the works of Raymond Roussel: e.g. *Impressions of Africa* and *Locus Solus*, which came down with such force to influence writers like John Ashbery and Harry Matthews. George Perec's *La disparition* (recently published in translation as *A Void*), a novel without the letter 'e', is another such challenge and pleasure – and Oulipo formalizes the whole tendency as a school.

But, this tendency can show itself differently in many different kinds of work, the values of which are totally different. One way is neo-formalism or the new formalism or whatever they call it. Which to me, is more like an interior designer working with a frame to produce a framed picture as a pleasing result. That doesn't interest me very much in poetry. Now, when you come to three-dimensional objects, that's different. I much prefer furniture to sculpture. I don't want to contemplate it, I want to sit down on it or at least lean against it. But not poetry. I don't like it if I can get comfortable with it.

On the other hand, the activity of framing and re-framing, framing a question, and seeing how the frames fit as a form of moving yourself through a work. Based on that, the dialogue, or dialectic, *between participation and resistance*, as I expressed it in *Absence Sensorium*, is key in making politics. I just want to read two stanzas from that book; these are stanzas that Dan Davidson wrote. I'm glad he wrote them so I can read them.

I can't exempt myself from my own critique,
anymore than I can free myself from the
corporate spinning sweatshops
and starvation assembly units. I mean,
I shop in that Supermarket to the World
write with power supplied by PG & E
pay taxes for death squads in Guatemala.

I can offer no adequate exclusions;
we all live with the same lie,
breathe in the same atmosphere.
So it becomes a question
of participation and resistance, or
simply participation.
I most heartily recommend the former.

I needn't explain why, yes?

AA: One of the questions I had asked in our email correspondence leading to this event was how did it come about that the sonnets, or the sonnet-like things in *Prospect of Release*, feel and sound more like sestinas. I am curious to hear, having said what you just said

about one aspect of designer formalism, what draws you to symmetry and asymmetry?

TM: In that poem, the sonnet, or sestina, is Rome. It is the place, as I said before, where I am, not the place where I *am-not-and-want-to-be*. It is the place, the thought, where I am trapped. As I said before, that's what I mean by Rome, and a sonnet is an Italian, i.e. Latin, word – sestina: the same. Rome. To reframe that sonnet form, to transmit using it, as a boundary object, a process of thought and change ineluctable. To work against that form. Form in that sense, however liberating, is a trap, a state of being trapped by your own focus and your own work.

But, I am using poetic form as if it were a metaphor. Lets me talk more plainly and outside that frame of talking about poetry, then. When you have a big event happen in your life, how do you react to it? You think about it. You think about it over and over and over again, over a period of time. That thought follows a presumably bell-shaped curve (like everything else on God's earth). And along that curve, you are thinking the same thoughts. I'm sure all of you have had this experience – you think this thought in different ways, in different forms, in different contexts, with something different happening at the margins, with different parts relating to other parts. You think it, and think it, and think it, and think it. Until, at some point, you have thought yourself through it. The thought is not gone, but it is not with you either. "It" has not been resolved. But you are somewhere else. You have walked off the bell-shaped curve. In a lot of ways, the sonnet sequence lends itself to registering that shape of experience, and that's how *Prospect of Release* works. That's the poem.

Prospect exhibits an intentionally in-turned, contained form that seems to live in a world of its own. The sonnet I use is a completely off-form: 4–3–3–4. Instead of being 4–4–3–3 or 8–6 or 4–4–4–2, it is completely symmetrical and inward facing. Almost guarded, defended, private. While the thought in the work is insistent, fragile but demanding. The poem becomes a vessel. Really, I was more inspired formally, not by sonnet sequences, but by Spenser's "Mutability Cantos" a work that has come back to me over and over again through the years. In an earlier book of mine, *Realism* (Burning Deck, 1993), is a piece called "Mute Canto" which is also inspired by the "Mutability Cantos." If I recollect correctly, Spenser's work is built on a 16 line stanza, of Alexandrines, 6-foot lines with a central caesura. Again, two parts facing in, formal structure.

Yet, the simpler story is just that I sat down one day and started writing them. I wrote the whole book in about 10 days. One night I wrote 14 sonnets. It was just – Boom! The glass tipped over, and out they poured.

Anonymous: That is a very wonderful comment about why you do translation, to get into English some things that aren't getting written in English, or aren't found there, or might not be able to be there in American culture. What languages do you write in? Do you translate from English back into another language?

AA: No, English only.

Anonymous: Or attempt to have certain things of your own work translated?

AA: I'm happy when it happens. I write in English only and translate primarily from Hebrew and what I now will call the languages of the former Yugoslavia, including Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian; I also translate from Spanish and occasionally other odd Romance things and, with help, sometimes from Arabic. The question of translation is such a political question because when you work in various aspects of this field, from the commercial to the solitary, you really begin to see what kind of machinery is at work, not in any conspiratorial way, but much worse, in the sense of deeply embedded assumptions about what can and cannot work or be palatable to certain kinds of supposedly defined audiences. It is an enormous amount of work to prepare space for the intrusion of some of these works. I've found that in both of the areas I've spent a lot of time working in over the past 15 years, which is a certain kind of Hebrew writing and Bosnian writing.

As far as having my own work translated into other languages, it is interesting and telling of my position, that the first major translation of any work of mine is *After Jews and Arabs* is going to appear in Sarajevo in Bosnian. It really puts me right where I want to be—in the far margins of any kind of discourse.

Anonymous: It is too bad your book *After Jews and Arabs* is not in Arabic.

AA: In fact, there was an attempt. Recently I got invited to a conference in Beirut, which I hope might help to further that project. But it has been avidly read, I know, in various places. For all I know, there may be certain pieces pirated which have appeared that I don't know about, because that is fairly common.

Anonymous: I think of all them in a different way. The French would take material, which might have something to do with Sephardic experience, and because it might have appeared in French, they would call this part of the French Mediterranean literature. This categorization is a kind of imprisonment, because it wasn't an appendage to Paris.

In another sense, to use a fashionable word, I find you two “committed” poets, a word perhaps going as far back as the time of your childhood. The effort to find this kind of language is a form of political praxis, because it is a studied attempt to say what we don't expect to hear. It takes quite an effort to disrupt the neat way we have worked these categories out.

One of the worst parts of the *Mediterranean* is not Sarajevo—we are actually warming up to that—but Cairo. To talk about that has almost not been done. So I see both of you as political in some way.

AA: First of all, thanks for your comments. I have found this definition to be something that is very practical over the last 10 years. At a certain point, I accepted the fact I have a certain skill, or knowledge. It could be used or not used. I have used it as a way of intervention into the accepted assumptions and towards the positing of something else. This has been an effective way to create certain political facts and actualities, which then become, not arguments, but positions or road-hazards for others, and put people on guard. If there isn't such a voice, or hazard around, people can simply assume that it isn't there. Even things that seem to be ineffectual, actually are really quite effective in various ways. I do feel politically motivated in that sense.

TM: Communities of people negotiate their relationships through documents. Those documents define the places where there are boundaries of communities. One negotiates by finding documents that have the strength to hold multiple approaches to interpretation and understanding. The function of the translator is to make it possible for cultures (I hate that word, but let's use it for the moment) to make more places where those boundaries can actually occur. More places where difference can be negotiated. That's the function of translation, and in fact it's the function of writing altogether I think. Or at least it's why I write.

We have a spatial-metaphorical system for how things relate. We always assume there are boundaries between any two objects. But in fact there are not always boundaries between them. Boundary is an idea with immense content to it. It's not a trivial idea, the edge of one thing, the edge of another.

By the way, what I am saying owes a great deal to an essay by John Seely Brown, chief scientist at Xerox and head of the Palo Alto Research Center, called “*The Social Life of Documents*.” You can find it in a Web magazine called FirstMonday. Here's the URL: <http://firstmonday.dk/issues/issue1/documents/index.html>. I recommend the essay; it does not belong to any poetic school and is highly effective if not real deep (it doesn't seek to be or have to be). I'm using it here to talk about politics. Translation is an exceptionally important way

to think about what a poem is, and what it is *politically*. If I look at my work, for example, I can say I'm translating a body of material that has absolutely no profile in current thinking. My work consists immensely of citation and is full of what I read, and what I read is a whole body of work that has no living meaning in our world, except in my work and a few other people's work. That is a similar function to translating contemporary poetry. It is less important to the moment; it is extremely important to me and perhaps to our future. Formally, and interpretatively, it is the same kind of writing. All writing, in that sense, is translation. In my writing I guess I'm saying I am translating a lost body of thought into a future body of thought in order that a future body of thought come to be. Perhaps I should speak no more on this subject in as single sitting, however. 'Ssssh,' the rabbis used to say, 'to the wise a hint is sufficient.'

AA: I was saying something, when we had coffee, about how I thought the book *After Jews and Arabs* functions. If one thinks about how poetry is not really a sale-able commodity, then one can then go from there to say that poets will continue to work in poetry regardless. There is a baseline of intention and attention to things. What I discovered, was that in order for other works or languages to be absorbed in this culture, they had to first go through poets, to find space in the culture. That is a very contradictory thing, because you are working with a very small audience. But I think that is the only way it can happen. I've thought of other circumstances where certain bodies of writing were appended to our culture. Think about the Latin American boom. One of the first people involved in that was Paul Blackburn, translating Julio Cortazar. There is something about that work having gone through the filter of attention the poet gives it, which I think would be impossible to be released in other ways. I find it interesting that *After Jews and Arabs* has seriously been read by a lot of poets, because it has a poetic and musical structure to it. That has been picked up on by certain musicians. Marc Ribot asked what were my models for this. I said Albert Ayler. Once the work gets in to the culture, it will be bastardized, commercialized, etc., but it arrives and is filtered. I mean, we know, for example, how many people have spoken the language of Jack Spicer through Richard Brautigan without having any idea where it might have come from. Or what poets involved in the Harlem Renaissance or the Umbra Arts Group pioneered and made part of the discourse without any debts being either offered or paid. These lessons need to be thought through in terms of how one would want to bring something into a culture.

Ron Silliman: I think I might have the same question from a different direction. I'd love to hear each

of you talk about how you see yourself using the functions of silence in your work. Both of you do it very actively, always involved in collaboration, citation, translation, a point of the writer as "ego", holding back so that other things come up, come forward, go around. Both of you use structures that emphasize that element. Tom, the piece you read at the opening – I waited so long for the final verb. If I was listening to German, that linguistic structure would have not stood out in the same way it does in English, the silence of the verb up to that point. Also, in *Absence Sensorium*. I was intrigued at the point which you actually identified stuff that Dan had written, because I wasn't able to tell from your own reading whether you were only picking those portions you have written.

TM: No, I wasn't.

RS: So, in fact, you were picking and owning both. Having read the book and known both authors reasonably well, there are really maybe 10 or 6 places where one can actually identify "this guy wrote that". It is a sort of remarkably seamless process which can really only occur if you don't have border fights.

TM: It was a very smooth collaboration. There was some deep connection formed down where that writing for us both had been compressed by time and only turned up to the attention, so different from one conscious attention, that two can unknowingly give to work together.

I read, and as you say 'own' Dan's words too because he has been silenced, and I don't want his words silenced.

Silence is a term that has been metaphysicalized like crazy in our time, has it not? Particularly as a function of John Cage's impact. Take 4'33" which is 4 minutes, 33 seconds of silence. Or other works which aren't necessarily silent but which may contain or be built on silence. There is a work of Cage's, the name of which I can't remember, I'm sorry, whose score simply tells the performer to come on the stage and "do something significant," or similar words.

I love Cage, of course. Yet, in his work silence is portrayed in a utopian and romantic way. And, perhaps, his 'silence' silences other and equally important silences.

There is no such thing as real silence, there is always sound; in Cage's work too silence is certainly not meant to be silent in the slightest, but to be a space in which you silence something to hear how full the world otherwise is of sound, and, if you will, how full of music, without our intervention. That is a highly Romanticized idea, curiously enough. And Cage is, to me if not to anyone else, a highly Romantic composer.

So silence is not neutral or metaphysical but an act. If that act is not necessarily a suppression, yet often enough it is one. Often when not intended as one. Silence is something which is not being said. Where there is something that is not being said, that absence can stand in well for a suppression of speech. Silence is *differed* from what is. It has the specificity of what, in a given condition, you are not hearing. Its form is the form of what is not being said.

AA: First of all, we still have not met, but I am a long-time reader, and I am glad you asked that question. For me, the whole question of syntax is very real in the sense that it has to do with growing up, hearing other languages, and fading in and out of them, according to particular American pressures of

conforming to, being ashamed of, not admitting to all these kinds of things. Then, going back to learning other languages, which had similar structures to languages I had heard a lot of, and passively inhabited, very intimately. That gave me a sense of plasticity with that kind of sentence you point out – where is this verb. That is Cicero, from learning Latin, where the verb can be way, way out there. It is also a musical model to me, from the kinds of music that I can't say much about because I've internalized it. The structures in music I see, particularly in jazz, deal with questions of syntax, silences, stops, starts, expectations, slightly nuanced repetitions of something that was hinted at but not articulated. Those are the kinds of things I take great pleasure in doing or seeing when they come out.