

PHILLY TALKS 5, Alan Gilbert / Rodrigo Toscano
September 17, 1998

RODRIGO TOSCANO

Notes on the Great Strike of '97

A move (at last)

a move
meant

Defrocked

is happenstance

The usual grievance procedures
long gone

Incontrovertibility of the positions
become plain

Tens of thousands
arraigned – is
one way to put it

Beholden to?

The burden of proof
on us
ok

In the wake of
so many
asynchronous stabs at

Regroupment

Hash out –
lock in –
the action-plan

(synchronous)

– Strike!

*As for
the abrogation
of past settlements
(that is, truces)*

Pleasure-pain of
every passing hour

Relish

Not flimsidarity
(the socio-sexuality of the ruling class is flimsidarity)

As “in it
for the long haul”

Preponderance of confidence
building

(these emotions – de-skilled as they’ve been
can attest?)

Retaliatory (to the core)
unapologetically
the front – broadens

“let’s go – see
how we figure
into it”

A measurable cut *into*
disaffectedness
institutional
disaffectedness

(*that* was “experimental”, pups
this might or might not be)

Henceforward –
a sense of entitlement
(as yet unofficial)

Carved out collectively

Collaterally rousing – others

“can I join in
in it?”

who were
(and this advisedly)
“free” to

4 or 5 Estimations

Faces. Because what else did not suffice. Noises
City Sources. I'm hungry claimed one voice (back there)
Here, are newer etchings. Stroll appealed. Chose the lanes.
Steel. Gas. Drivers. His wanting to be – “right there” – how?
Easy to say Future, a hard point to pinpoint
That is, how'd you get from Hillcrest to the Bayfront?
Bread. Slowness: not barefoot as there's too much smashed glass
Equals, shoes, purchased, and so forth, what's perceiving?
Now's a sea gull. Flew. By. And so forth. Now's a fence.
There *is* no out, once an out becomes a question.
Pants aren't purchased, pants are sown, How do *you* fit – in.
Forms – faces, not chosen, mark honesty? *get real* –
Will mean, How have you got – by. Corn, chilies, barley
Subsidized lyrics as in your puffy schools, pray
What does take mean, docks unloading, who inspects what?
I'm a doormat talking as if I'm a kingpin.
There's my world down there. Bull – crap. What inspects who, Group
Bellies, gonads, eyeballs, creatures of the light, speak.
I feel mis-placed, a non-self spoke – estimations?

Greenish oily wavelets, bouncing yellow lights – gleam
Look different from far away, spread out, than they now
At this shore, words groping, *shall all wend to nought.*
Nevertheless, pier 39, serves as a stage
For a one who's bundled in a cotton jacket
Placid, cold, among the warmness of such absence
Wedged between hope and dread, has revealed a...[gropes for]
Wood, remains countered by wood, in all its forms – *is?*
Wedged between earth and sky, has become a non-being
Always already something else: soil, pine, pier, stage.
So that ships, floating upon forced economies
Which like to view themselves as random, casual – gleam
Also, from whence came this single existential
Act, is a residual form from a social past
Is bobbing on till Other Metaphoric Needs
Intersect it, other determinate moments
Clash, which means, until another person comes by –
For, estimations of contradictions – “a chat”
I'd of asked one, but they had something else to do.

Palm interrupts moon, though moon has little to tell.

Dredged-up rock doubted jagged. Crabs would be knowledge.

Fear, the untenderness of train carts for miles, screech.

And everything is not trauma, you young gothics.

Slow, the stomach of the city digests old signs

Or the unharmonious blacksmith of night, hums.

Furthermore, Genuine Butter (carton) empty

Strikes a nerve. Which one, could be a six month project

Or an immediate result, unfettered, flies –

Somewhere else to be, somewhere else to be, twitching

Why, is an impertinence to the body's climb.

Someone else to be [Club Artaud, I laugh at this]

The climb – into the ground. *Holds on to what?* A now

Estimates a new arm, a Happening History.

Without Love or Hate unable to modulate

That feverish moment – who's heard spoken about?

Illych said one lives more than in all one's life.

So the analogy went, as others permute.

That all imparities and lacks won't fuse, have to.

Mornings. Because how else do nights define – passage.

Routine. Shapes compelling. Skip the tired urban themes.

Paint chipped off the curbs, tires ran over them, ground dust –

Is packed into corners, crevices, – I...why try?

And at the umpteenth hour, estimate, such values.

He, could puke, but he don't like that, as if *like* meant

Means squat. Welcome, to the festival of privilege

Pay to Play; Play, for pay. Geez partner, same routine

Serio, bromeador, severo, sarcastico.

Sometimes morning sickness for who's pregnant – with death.

This also a testament to cable tv.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because all things stop.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because it goes on.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because you can't be.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because you have been.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because you might be.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because you won't know.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because it's so much.

And it all *shouldn't* matter because – everything.

After the reflective sheen of the harbor's tints
An attempt to, about, comes from, it a cover
Merely? After the rhapsodic interlude – shed.
Before the closing gap between you and others
High noon began by strapping on its boots to romp
And *lord* do the people suffer in war-time (he
Wouldn't know it, yet doesn't care to know it, soon.)
De l'horizon d'un seul a l'horizon de tous
Wrote Eluard in '48 (who's groping here – grafts)
Would require kindness, not as a mass campaign, yet
Not as a not toward one either. Because *it has*
Might matter: phrases, buckets, slogans, verses, gruel.
And as the century's deep scarring seem to linger
(There, where he was, less railing to hold on to – climb
Down, a symptom of the times, it said, signing class)
A life's capacity for struggle – Estimate
Amid analogies of silence, rupture, touch.
Tall orders in the late day, tired stamina spoke
It's becoming less obvious *Which words trace which deeds*

ALAN GILBERT

August 20, 1998

dear Rodrigo

I appreciate the packet of poems you sent. It's quite a wide range of materials, though they share some related concerns. Most prominent among these is what I see as a tension in your writing between wanting to break down certain ideological positions and attempting to reconfigure others. By ideology I mean the cognitive apparatus with which one makes sense of the world, or as you phrase it in your note to "Prologue to a City Poem": "the dialectic between social being and consciousness." One example of what I'm describing as the approach to ideology in your poems occurs in "Notes on the Great Strike of '97", which disrupts conventional depictions of labor struggles (usually portrayed in a realist mode) by fragmenting both narration and representation. At the same time, the structure of the poem signifies labor's current multifarious forms in North America: from traditional unionized labor on the factory assembly line to temporary secretaries, from sweatshop garment workers to migrant produce pickers, etc. By expanding the way in which labor is depicted, the poem seeks to represent a larger expansion in the struggle of labor against capital. In other words, if the battle with an inequitable economic system is no longer solely the provenance of a traditionally defined factory-based working class, then this opens up the conflict onto many more fronts. Of course, the challenge is then to connect the ideological reconfiguration that takes place in the poem with social practice.

What I also find valuable in a poem such as "Notes on the Great Strike of '97" is the way in which ideology (both aesthetic and political) is tied directly into the practices of a specific social group – in this instance, the striking UPS workers. It's not simply a question of describing what happened (in the sense that the subject of the poem is a successful strike carried out according to familiar labor methods = union goes on strike and walks the picket lines), but of attempting to enact in your poem the various ideological elements that went into, and did not go into, this particular labor struggle. This ideological reworking is the crucial aspect of a poem that has a complex relationship to the representation of organized and unorganized labor in America. It's also interesting to note that it's quite possible a reader might not be entirely certain as to the exact nature of the struggle, or even the participants, from the poem alone. Thus, your mode of presentation forces the reader to go outside the poem to its contextualizing social and historical conditions in order to return to the poem with a fuller understanding of its meanings. In this sense, the model of the poem is a kind of pedagogical instruction informing both the reader and the poem. It's a mode of reading that signifies a movement back and forth between the ideological and social realms.

Another example of this circling back and forth between ideology and social practice occurs in your poem "Journal." A specific instance would be the way in which the larger historical context for the opening line, "Millennial clothes on the carpet, 6am", is provided in the first line of the next stanza, "Millennial because cotton of a land grab." Here, the poem maps the social sphere, though at times more along the lines of the Joycean stream-of-consciousness of *Ulysses* than a Jamesonian cognitive mapping, especially once the subject of the poem leaves the house: "(Postcard) Stop and admire thatchwork and lattices / Of this mural. You could make a lot out of it. / Roosters crowing late unhappy about something. / Can't decide if I like other tourist or not." In this sense, the formal technique employed in "Journal" is closer to the overdetermination of meaning in certain Modernist projects, which sought to saturate the historical moment as a result of a dissatisfaction with what was deemed the vacuity of bourgeois culture. In

contrast to this, certain strains of postmodernism (most noticeably anti-art art) generate meaning more reactively in their endeavor to break down various aesthetic and social hierarchies established by Modernism once it became institutionalized as High Modernism.

Another specific reference to mapping occurs in “Premise No. 1”: “Here come them poets again, mapping.” It seems important to your poetry that this mapping be a form of ideological contestation. Language creates the maps, and maps are the means by which individuals and groups orient themselves socially and politically. These necessary orientations – necessary for responsible political and interpersonal decisions – might be termed moments of provisional closure, and I’m interested in contemporary experimental writing that looks for these closures, while at the same time keeping open the process of signification, of identity, and of critique. The piece “4 or 5 Estimations”, which is another mapping poem, concludes with a kind of provisional closure in its attempt to discuss “kindness” and “A life’s capacity for struggle” against a background of “the century’s deep scarring”, and then makes a connection at the end between ideology and practice: “*Which words trace which deeds*”.

I was also struck by the lines in your poem “Journal” – “Decision being Circumstance, itself wrought by Force / *From Relations, themselves being formed by a Process*” – which find a concrete echo in the next stanza: “Women’s stories, pruned, let alone if they weren’t white / Or straight.” In fact, the question of force in social relations runs through many of your poems, and I like the way you concretize it in your note to “Prologue to a City Poem”: “(i.e. where you can stand, for how long, before this or that force responds to you, and why)” after its more abstract irruption at the end of the poem. What we’re talking about is a realistic approach to power, without necessarily depicting it in a realist manner: “Force, the most present of things, ghost lurking [He, writes]” (“The Disparities”). This emphasis on relations of power may be why there’s a skepticism in your writing concerning easy social transformations. “Redemption? / Potent motif because *zilch* (ever) gets redeemed” (“Premise No. 1”). This may also result from a focus on local social and political configurations, and the way in which dominant and constraining ideologies permeate all aspects of existence. In this environment, one role for poetry is to become a tool in helping both to disrupt and rearrange the ideological forces that partially shape an individual’s local environment.

Of course, most writers of experimental literature would argue that their work is a challenge to dominant ideologies. But where I see the difference is in an approach to language that seeks to undermine the referential aspect of language in general (i.e., those who subscribe to Saussure’s definition of the sign as arbitrary and seek to push this conceptualization of language to its breaking point), and a concept of language in which the sign is a site of social struggle between different classes, social groups, etc. (i.e., V.N. Volovinov’s definition of the sign in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*). Influenced by Volovinov’s argument that all signs are ideological, Marxist theorists during the past few decades have theorized a less deterministic relation between ideology and economic conditions; that is, they have broken with the notion that ideology is a direct product of economic forces and that different ideologies emanate from different classes. For some of these theorists (such as Stuart Hall), it is not a question of simply upsetting the relation between material conditions and ideology, but of articulating new ways in which ideology is put in the service of emerging social forces and vice versa. The point I am trying to make is that I see “Notes on the Great Strike of ’97” as approaching language and ideology in a way that allows the poem’s methods and insights to be reconfigured into different social struggles, some perhaps larger than the specificity of the strike itself. Poems such as “Journal” and “4 or 5 Estimations” can be similarly reconfigured, though perhaps on a more site-specific scale.

If a less reductive and deterministic relation between ideology and material conditions is posited, then what's needed are alternative coherent ideologies to challenge those already in existence. It's not simply a question of current and incipient economic modes of production determining the forms political struggle will take, as in the traditional Marxist model. Thus, it's not so much a question of finding ways in which to disrupt the relations between capitalism and representation, as it is one of finding alternative representations to capitalism as now constituted. I think poetry can still play a role in this, however much the mainstream media loves to talk about its continued irrelevancy to the culture at large. For the same reason, this is why I feel obsessions in experimental writing with critiques of representation fall short. They are a necessary first step, but need to be only one part of a larger project, in the same way that the development of cultural studies in Britain has been described by Lawrence Grossberg as the transition "from a model of communication (production-text-consumption; encoding-decoding) to a theory of contexts." (In poetry, a good example of this kind of transition would be the evolution of a writer like Barrett Watten who moved from a Russian Formalist inspired emphasis on questions of referentiality to a cultural studies influenced "cultural materialism" [his phrase].)

In other words, I don't think that within a late twentieth-century North American social, political and economic milieu, scrambling the transmission of the sign is going to be enough. Instead, the struggle over the content with which a sign is imbued would seem to be one of the primary tasks of poetry these days. And while some people may be skeptical about the way in which the lyrical impulse has resecured a small foothold among younger experimental writers, I think this results from the tentative beginnings of a reevaluation of the ways in which signs can be given alternative content, as well as being a way to reintroduce more explicit forms of subjectivity and agency into the poem. To put it another way, I think the difference between the way the "current" generation will concern itself with the relationship between ideology and social realities and the way a previous generation dealt with this issue will be in a renewed emphasis on questions of agency and subjectivity, as opposed to a more structural poetics of social formation in which language is conceived of as an instrumentalizing force perhaps more than as a force to be used as an instrument.

This question of agency is obviously a crucial concern in your poetry, particularly in your recent O Books book *Partisans*, which seems to me to be focused on a reexamination of this topic without a lot of the trappings of the more conventional expressive ego one finds in recent (and not so recent) lyric poetry. The way in which agency plays a part in *Partisans* is related to what I see as your interest in the role ideology plays in social formations: "WHAT WILL HIGHLY-PROCESSED SUBJECTIVITIES / – AS PART OF A SOCIAL SURPLUS / – NEWLY INVESTED / BE SAYING / ABOUT DOING." While arguing for the ability of individuals to instigate change, you also seem to be acknowledging the ideological and material constraints on their ability to take direct action. Your term "Agent (cy)", appearing earlier in the book, points to this quality of forming and being formed, of the potential to be both active and passive.

This is different from the way agency is posited in the more overtly lyrical poetry written by various younger poets these days. I must say that I share some of Silliman's reservations, mentioned in an earlier *Philly Talks* (#3), concerning "the French-influenced short abstract lyric that may be the characteristic form of younger North American writers" (though I don't see the particular type of lyric he is describing as nearly so prevalent, even among practitioners of the lyric, which I don't think is itself *the* "characteristic form"). I can't imagine the "current" generation is going to completely abandon the cultural politics of poetry. At the same time, because both mainstream and non-mainstream poetry have become more heterogeneous (though still not nearly enough), I don't think there will be a new avant-garde poetry

movement as classically defined, and for this we should probably be grateful. I hope as artists we have moved beyond the notion of vanguardist movements out ahead of the “masses” and trickle-down theories of avant-gardism in the twentieth century. Personally, I welcome the heterogeneity of the current manifestation of the avant-garde, though the most obvious danger is that it fuels a “star” system.

What interests me, and what I see being tentatively formulated in the work of various younger poets, is the development of a more instrumental and pedagogical approach to language and poetry rooted in an exploration of our current social and economic conditions. My sense is that a writing modeled more on a kind of radical pedagogy and less on an isolated reader attempting to “actively” decipher an experimental text might be one direction for non-mainstream writing to take. I don’t feel comfortable presenting a list of younger poets in order to “prove” my theory, but this is certainly one way in which I would approach your work. Your poem “Corollary A” is concerned, in fact, with a pedagogical environment, though obviously one depicted negatively. What would be the role of poetry in this environment? Only to question authority? A necessary step, no doubt. But also to in-form. This is where poetry’s marginality to the culture is precisely its strength, since, as you point out in this poem, it’s the unimaginative approach to history in the “text books” – and society – that partially turns the “teacher” into a “warden / preacher” and provides the students with “non-access / (repeat) / non-access” to the workings of the world around them.

best

Alan

No future

Parking near a fire hydrant for lack of a better space.
The postmodern box, a dull reflection covering the spread.
At an impasse. White noise. Did you see that outside
or on TV? There's no freedom from chronology.
Blue light specials faintly illuminate a paltry crowd.
A shopping cart wheel scrapes sideways down the aisle.

Language may influence, but material conditions
determine, like hearing a name spoken indecipherably
over the loudspeaker. Carny sexploitation. Every dream
again deferred. The barstool wobbles beneath you,
dragging a sleeve through salsa and beer. Fighting
a 100 acres of brush fire, a day of anger's slow smolder.

Turning an empty lot into a landfill, history forgot
to take out the garbage. Just rewards. A dialect of justice.
"I must have the all that's in it –
In the labor that I sell."
Out in the street with plastic rollers in her hair.
Bomb squad sirens, bells and whistles.

Checks cashed. On-site payroll. There is no grace
at the end of the road. What's your phone number?
Traffic presses in a blur as workers repair the shoulder.
Ditchweed grows near the wooden fence posts.
Our actions are contingent to other actions. So whaddya decide?
Psychic oil spill. Dead in the water. No romance in that.

Static limits

The streets quickly fill with shoppers.
Landlords keep raising the rents.
A bitter wind rustles bags of curbside trash.
An Atlantic economy gone global: markets
for goods and slaves and resources.
Fluid space and manipulated time. Capital's
rapid turnover. Buying stock in prisons
for the poor.

Exhausted by the end of the work week.
A speeding train in a dream clacked
 beginagainbeginagainbeginagain
 beginagainbeginagainbeginagain
The blue flicker of the TV at night for company,
since no one picks up the phone at the other end.
Racer X versus Speed Racer. Static limits
dialogue. "He rambled 'til the butchers cut him down."
Free association of people, not words.

During the late Middle Ages, I marched
on the capitol with the maimed and insane.
One banner read: "We're here to crush obfuscation."
The crowd tipped over the king's carriage,
as it slowly rolled through the mud,
soiling advertisements on its side.

The people's court

It's sometimes difficult to find the beginning
or end or the thread betwixt the two.
House finch, shot glass and golf ball.
Save as an RTF file. New school
and old school. Haves and have-nots.
More than figuratively. Class glass ceiling
in a society where easily thwarted aspirations
fill every screen. Penal colonies.

Why take the most tortuous route to the obvious?
Equality must be rooted in economics.
Big banks take little banks.
Anemic American dream of redemption.
An ice cream truck tipped over
when it rounded the corner too quickly,
spilling its goods across the hot asphalt.
"Two bad winters, a wet spring
A bloody summer and no king."
Fields of artichokes harvested by immigrant labor.

Seemingly up in the face of convention,
though motionless in the predator's gaze.
Wild dogs in the lots haunt piles of garbage.
Plastic liter Pepsi bottle tumbleweed.
Working overtime hours without receiving
overtime pay. Tainted meat. Holy
rollers. Comic book cognition.

An industrial barge floating on the river
briefly blocks the sun. I wish it were you
calling me. Zooming through the hours.
A need for communication to move
a dialogue along, to draw calmly
on a personal history. Monads hidden
from each other.
Who's at the door?

Sounds like no one's home.

Poem ending with a line by Claude McKay and a footnote

The net of superstitions cast wide, yet
attempting again to begin making sense.
Constructive, not just destructive.
A rational dialogue aimed at mutual understanding.

The scatter of capital becoming total itself.

Cruise ship religions.

“From Fordism to flexible accumulation.”

The spectacle of stock car racing and the NBA.

IMF riots in:

Seoul Warsaw Jakarta

Istanbul Lima

Kingston Cairo Manila*

Wall Street drones on during the late-night shift,
while the subway rumbles underground.
The fluorescent lights of a small donut shop flicker.
Mastering the master’s language. Lingual tingle
and pain in a loop.
Art against advertising. How free is verse?

Couplets and rhyme schemes, dust bowls and love trains.
“The tiger in his strength his thirst must slake.”

— — — — —

*Walton, John, “Urban protest and the global political economy: the IMF riots,”
The capitalist city: global restructuring and community politics, Smith, Michael Peter
and Feagin, Joe R., eds., Basil Blackwell, 1987, 364-386.

*Rodrigo Toscano on Alan Gilbert, or
two determinative, inter-related, opposing and contradictory dynamics interpenetrating the economies of
social-living, and the cultural movements they wrench into being, and the tendencies
and fractions therein...*

Productive

“The Scene” (the experimentalist poetics scene) in San Francisco, in New York, in Los Angeles, and all other “scenes” in their orbits, are in a process of (as yet) ineffable and (as yet) ineluctable *Decomposition*. “Decomp” for short, we now say, in reference to this or that, or about one another, uttered with ease or difficulty (cheerily or rather glumly) as to be *properly* understood, addressed...read. So deep-rooted and rapid is this Decomposition that almost every occasion does not fail to bring to surface its very inner-workings; it is duly acted upon, it is unwittingly or wittingly *developed*. No more having to feign a desire to “reach out” to some “other scene” – tragicomedy that that is, the *heartache* of some “other scene” somewhere beckoning our attention, or whose attention should take note of our beloved tangling and untangling. Every exchange is now expressive of it; one subterfuge is only displaced or counterposed by another. Who we’d gull into it being otherwise, we don’t (as yet) know socially (though we might personally); who we’d justify it to, with any scientific perspective, philosophic or aesthetic demeanor, we would, in fact, *run* from...now that the very essence of it is all we’ve come to be. No longer do we snarl “preachy” at one another, now that everyone is its proper preacher...no longer do we ward off “totalisms” with such indignation, now that we’ve come to enjoy, depend on, commiserate in – its more accurate payoff schedule. Not only have “the chickens come home to roost”, but the roosts themselves have been **outsourced**.

*

*

*

We now say

It’s *artistic*.

Indeed a lot of Alan Gilbert’s work is artistic; for example, a line from his poem “Static Limits”: “Landlords keep raising the rents.” Besides that being an artistic occasion in itself (landlords who keep raising rents), it’s also *artistic* in the sense that he (Gilbert) has been (willingly or unwillingly) put to task once more. Indeed, “A bitter wind rustles bags of curbside trash.” Indeed,

Exhausted by the end of the work week.
A speeding train in a dream clacked

beginagainbeginagainbeginagain
beginagainbeginagainbeginagain

It's...*quite* (also, that I called in sick today to write this, at the risk of being disciplined, and that you truly understand why we now say "artistic" to all such predicaments, that too...)

But then, two lines at the end of the second stanza are *something else*, a defining moment, a formulation that is resilient to the morass of ironies and brute facts that came before it, an utterance directed both at workers' on-going historic struggle around their ability to respond collectively, and, as a salvo, in part aimed at the (real and imaginary) Decomp Poets of North America (DPNA), with respect to the sometimes pronounced triumphalism that avant-garde movements are prone to, regarding the liberational aspects of language, too often described as being "inherent" in language.

"He rambled 'til the butchers cut him down."
-->Free association of people, not words.

This last line (occasion) imbedded in the middle of that poem configures the axes for the whole piece; that "something else" might be called an *intervention*, in terms of its honing in on a dynamic context. It is (and would be) a hard won platform from which to make meaning.

And in the final stanza, having been relegated to look to a pre-capitalist time to make "it" stand out – given that "No Future", in terms of "any other" social order being possible (it having been, by hegemonic force, set, "A Static Limit)...Gilbert, not just a student *of*, but an actor *in* History, then spins a parable for us...

During the late Middle Ages, I marched
on the capitol with the maimed and insane.
One banner read: "We're here to crush obfuscation."

*

*

*

"The Scene" (loose confederations made up of groupuscules, of 2's of 3's of 4's), whether it be in Washington, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Seattle, Vancouver, Toronto, or San Diego, allegedly in the gravitational pull of the larger metropolises, are in a process of still, perilously reversible and increasingly articulatable *Reconstitution*. "Recon" for short, we now can say about this or that, or about one another, uttered with an earnest determination or with a sober confidence of it determining, uttered purposefully or even casually, as to *approximate* an understanding, a form address...a reading possibility. So provisional and meandering is this Reconstitution, that almost every occasion barely succeeds in bringing to surface its itinerant demands; it *is*, however, acted upon, and it is consciously or unconsciously being *developed*. No more having to muster a disgust at some "other scene" – tragicomedy that *that is*, the *strawman* of some "other scene" somewhere out to sap our focus, or whose attention would, intriguingly covet of our tangling and untangling. Every exchange is now expressive of it; one resolution is openly countered or contested by another; who we'll have to justify it to, we (already) know socially (though we might not personally); who we would withhold these views from, with any scientific integrity, philosophic or aesthetic disposition, we now, in fact, spend entire democratic evenings with...now that the very essence of it is what we want to be, need to be; no longer do we snarl "mere formalist" at one another, now that everyone is involved in its formal unfolding; no longer do we reductively denounce so many "aesthetic retrograde maneuvers" with

such haste, now that we've come to understand our own complicity with such *kraft*. Its cultural disbursement rates remain unknown to us, though we attend to it. Not only have "the chickens flown off to conspire with other chickens", but the uprooted roosts elsewhere have been **organized**.

* * *

“Now Jantleman this is to let you know in all Parts
that
we have suffered hungary for sumtime and we have
bore it paceantly
but you still keep starfing us more and more
but with great reaserlusen we will not bear it no
longer...”

A stanza from Gilbert's poem "A brief history of time" suddenly juts out among others, the language culled from some text of the past – one from our own Capitalist Epoch (possibly from the Enclosure period in British History, or from the Irish Colony) – that speaks to a growing sense of geographical/socio-political integration, a resolve in responding to newly erected parameters, so that through language (that statement from back then, re-galvanized for us now) it is thereby resolved that – it, no longer shall be borne, A Static Limitation, confronted: "bump this noise – we ain't going down like that!" (1998, USA, San Francisco, The Mission District).

Such markers are prevalent in Gilbert's work, and they reconstitute for us the ampleness of vision that is largely missing in our thinking our historical present. For example, these lines from his poem "Shoot-out":

How many are marginal to the culture?
And what if the margins exceed the center,
as machines drone into the evening

Gilbert, broaching the possibility of reaching a critical mass of right or left consciousness, and where that might leave "one", leaves us hanging for a bit longer, acknowledging that the motor of capitalist time is what *has* us, among other things.

And at the supposed "end" of that poem:

Choosing what is more difficult,
Even after time has expired

One might be lead to understand from the phrase "time has expired" that particular objective conditions for significant change *have not* appeared on the horizon (but that doesn't mean we sit around and just wait, ceding hardwon ground in the meanwhile).

The question Gilbert often poses is what kind of movement are these poems' lines intersecting with, aligning with...Gilbert's poems make themselves available to such questions by tactically leaving themselves *open* – *by closing* certain “unfixities” – as in two lines from the poem “The people's court”:

Why take the most tortuous route to the obvious?
Equality must be rooted in economics.

It is likely that anyone within earshot distance of the (real and imaginary) RPNA (Reconstitution Poets of North America) might appreciate the stridency of this inquiry, or opening.

Gilbert sees an opening as necessarily developing from a deep dissatisfaction with political conditions, though one loaded with perilous potential as well...as in these lines from the poem “Crosscurrent”:

Fragmented and pragmatic histories...

Aesthetic estrangement...

Populist
tugs on the culture. Flush left, flush right.

At the end of the poem, where “There is no ideal speaker”, where at the same time “Things I need a little time to figure out”...Gilbert's poetics there, as throughout, signal nothing less than a political breakthrough, registered in the cultural arena: a synthesis of two seemingly unsynthesizable dynamics: the decomposition and reconstitution of both capital and its complex opposition.

dear Rodrigo

You make a complex distinction in your response between experimental poetry communities in a partial state of “Decomposition” and those moving more toward “Reconstitution.” In fact, it would almost seem as if you were saying that in those places where an avant-garde tradition is strongest (NYC, LA, the Bay Area) there is the greatest potential for a kind of implosion. At the very least, you stress a difference between a “duly...developed” poetry scene and one created more actively, however tentatively (“provisional and meandering”, you write). Would you attribute this current lack of a unified experimental writing community among younger poets to a pluralism among avant-garde theory and practice or to a condition of uncertainty? I've heard it described both ways, and it's even been portrayed as a crisis among younger poets writing in the shadow of Language poetry. Although I resist the overly dramatic connotations of the word “crisis” in this particular usage, I think it would be helpful to analyze the situation both in terms of avant-garde theory and practice, as well as in reference to more sociological factors such as kinds and availability of resources (including, for instance, experimental writing programs in universities), and the ways in which different writers are positioned in relation to this capital – cultural and otherwise.

From my vantage point in New York City, I find it extremely difficult to separate these dual processes of “Reconstitution” and “Decomposition,” and I'm unsure how to apply them to the various experimental poetry communities here. If what you mean by *both* “Decomp” and “Recon” is a constant shift of ideological relations and determining positions within and among differing experimental poetry

communities, then, yes, I think we are experiencing this more intensely than at certain – though not all – previous moments within the history of the twentieth-century avant-garde. Is this partly why we’ve chosen some of the most overtly political lines from each other’s poetry to analyze? As a way of trying to at least temporarily secure an ideological position from which we can start talking about various issues relating to contemporary poetry?

fondly

Alan

Dear Alan,

The two paragraphs you referred to in my opening statement were not meant as an analysis of the experimentalist milieu per se (though I probably ordered one), in terms of which actual institutions might recognize, might foster, be oblivious to, or shun a particular tendency (ours) within the formal discipline of National Literature...something that you, Steve Evans, Mark Wallace, and (afta-nafta) Jeff Derksen among others have delved into and could surely develop at length (the Language Poets 1.0 having definitively made that breach).

Instead, I engaged a subjective thinking – on an objective thought process – The Capitalist Logic of Exchange – to its (polemically pitched for sure) *logical* “conclusion”...in order to begin to apprehend what fully operative dynamic might now be constructing a writing “community,” especially this one, because it is so receptive (in principal, at least, if not in practice) to even the slightest changes in its forms....

raving into an era...era of the MAI (Multi-Lateral Agreement on Investment)

So the logic gets described as having *decompositional* and *reconstitutive* aspects; and those two being *intrinsic* modalities, not just rendering “the effects of”...continually operating on, for example, the very bonds that unite us or break us up. I’ll entertain this a bit further.

Decomp. (preemptively and reactively)

a generalized atomization and delocalization:

deregulation, privatization, decollectivization:

the 1,001 coercions per month to achieve that...

– –

analytically, or at the gut-level played out, the affect (or “art”) of the:

“independent contractor,” the temp, “the team member,” the girlfriend,

the boyfriend, the student, the worker, the uprooted migrant, the non-white,

the incarcerated

– –

In California, props 187, 209, 227, 226

Recon. (preemptively and reactively)

a generalized drive (or desire) toward re-collectivization:
a regroupment of working-class forces (and their allies)
the 1,001 resistances to atomization and alienation...

— —

analytically, or at the gut level played out, the affect (or maneuver) of the:
“independent contractor,” the temp, “the team member,” the girlfriend,
the boyfriend, the student, the worker, the uprooted migrant, the non-white,
the incarcerated

— —

In California the defeat of 226, the national teamsters’ victory, the potential of the Labor Party, SAWSJ (scholars, artists, and writers for social justice), a rigorous reexamination of the most glib “post-feminisms,” “post-marxisms”...a mild recovery from the trappings of Détente critical ensembles, possibilities...

*

the morpher / the interpenetrater...has even more “play” in this milieu than in others?

You understood correctly that I didn’t mean this person, or that piece, “is decomp” and that other “is recon”...or “scenes” in cities for that matter (though I did allude to margins and centers.) A receptivity to one aspect necessarily *abstracts* the other...

Comradely,

Rodrigo