The Return of the (Numerical) Repressed: From Free Verse to Procedural Play

In organic poetry the metric movement, the measure is the direct expression of the movement of perception. And the sounds, acting together with the measure, are a kind of extended onomatopoeia—i.e., they imitate, not the sounds of an experience... but the feeling of an experience, its emotional tone, its texture.

—Denise Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form"

The exhaustion of tradition, represented by rules, is the starting point in the search for a second foundation, that of mathematics.

—Jacques Roubaud, "Mathematics in the Method of Raymond Queneau"

Constraint is... a commodious way of passing from language to writing.

—Marcel Bénabou, "Rule and Constraint"

Free verse = freedom; open form = open mind, open heart: for almost half a century, these equations have been accepted as axiomatic, the corollary of what has come to be called, with respect to poetic language, the "natural look." "The line comes (I swear it)," announced Charles Olson in "Projective Verse" (1950), "from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes at the moment that he writes." "Trouble with conventional form (fixed line count & stanza form)," said Allen Ginsberg in 1961, "is, it's too symmetrical, geometrical, numbered and pre-fixed—unlike to my own mind which has no beginning and end, nor fixed measure of thought... other than its own cornerless mystery—to transcribe the latter in a form most nearly representing its actual occurrence." And lest we conclude that Olson and Ginsberg represent a particular Projectivism or Beat sensibility rather than the dominant poetic discourse of the period, consider Robert Lowell's explanation, in his Paris Review interview of 1961, of the turn toward free verse that characterized the Life Studies poems of 1959: "I couldn't," says Lowell, sounding not unlike Ginsberg, "get my experience into tight metrical forms... I felt that the meter plastered difficulties and mannerisms on what I was trying to say to such an extent that it terribly hampered me." Even as sophisticated an analyst of poetic form as Anthony Easthope suggests that a "necessary condition" for the postmodern overthrow of the bourgeois subject, of the Cartesian ego, is "the use, as in Pound's Cantos, of 'free verse,'" where the rhythm can, as Pound puts it, "correspond exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed." "This exact correspondence," remarks Easthope, "cannot take place when the abstract pattern of pentameter is imposed throughout and when closure of the syntagmatic chain tries to run everything together."

The fidelity of verse form to the actual arc of feeling, the notion that rhythm, sound repetition, and lineation can enact the process of discovery, that they can mime what Robert Duncan called, in the title of his 1960 collection, "the opening of the field," can be traced back, of course, to Whitman and, more immediately, to D. H. Lawrence, whose Preface to the American Edition of New Poems (1918) is a remarkable manifesto calling for "free verse" as the "direct utterance from the instant, whole man," as the "soul and the mind and body surging at once, nothing left out." As Lawrence expressively put it:

Free verse toes no melodic line, no matter what drill-sergeant... We can get rid of the stereotyped movements and the old hackneyed associations of sound and sense. We can break the stiff neck of habit... free verse has its own nature, that... is neither star nor pearl, but instantaneous like plasm... It has no finish. It has no satisfying stability, satisfying to those who like the immutable. None of this. It is the instant: the quick... For such utterance any externally applied law would be mere shackles and death. The law must come new each time from within.

In his own best poems, as I have argued elsewhere, verse form is, as Lawrence described it, determined by the simulation of a particular utterance, the voice of an "I" that alternately cajoles, teases, and hectors his nameless interlocutor, using linear patterns that loop back and forth to enact the "gradual pulsing to and fro" of consciousness coming to awareness.

But in the last decade or so, the "freedom" of free verse has come in for some serious questioning. Robert Hass, for example, has remarked somewhat sadly (even as he has continued to write predominantly in free verse) that whereas "free verse" once "had something to do with [the] revolt against some alternative formal principle that feels fictitious," "Now, I think, free verse has lost its edge, become neutral, the given instrument." Which is to say that free verse has become quite simply the lyric norm. In a recent American Poetry Review (March–April 1990), for example, every one of the sixteen poets represented (and this includes the Czech poet Miroslav Holub, the Brazilian Adélia Prado, and the Irish Eavan Boland, as well as such U.S. poets as Marvin Bell, John Koethe, Debra Gregerman, Diane Swain, and Lucien Stryk) writes free verse. Indeed, students coming to poetry today are increas-
ingly taught that if a given text is lineated, then it's a "poem," no matter how the lines are constituted. The question of meter, of syllable and stress count, of quantity is thus thrust into the background.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that a group of younger poets who call themselves "New Formalists" have launched a campaign to revive "meter," by which they mean almost exclusively iambic pentameter. Brad Leithauser, for example, dismisses free verse as showing "signs of fatigue" and declares that "Anyone who loves poetic form, and has worked hard within it, knows that the iambic line is still a lodestar mine." Indeed, the iamb is the unit that "feels right." A similar case is made by David Dooley in an essay called "Iambic in the 80s," which discusses the use, by contemporary poets of three metrical forms: blank verse, rhymed satiric quatrains, and the sonnet (CC 116-28). And Timothy Steele insists that "Fine metrical composition makes a serious appeal to the ear and mind that no other kind of composition makes."4

But such formulations—and there are many in the various New Formalist manifestos—are based on a premise that will not stand up to scrutiny, namely, that there are no cultural, ideological, or social constraints placed upon metrical choice, that, on the contrary, metrical choice is wholly "free" and that hence traditional forms are there for the using. If, by this reasoning, I feel like writing heroic couplets on Monday, Spenserian stanzas on Tuesday, and free verse on Wednesday, depending on my mood, my subject matter, and so on, I can do so at will. "Even in an age remarkable for its science," writes Timothy Steele, "our individual and collective well-being and happiness depend on how thoughtfully and sensitively we respond to qualitative issues in human experience. . . . Poetry preeminently supplies this guidance" (MM 293), the implication being that "science" and "poetry" are somehow on different planes and that the latter "answers" to the former without being implicated in its assumptions or hypotheses.

The notion that we can somehow revive and reproduce the exact metrical forms of earlier centuries flies in the face of common sense. Even Timothy Steele, after all, would probably be reluctant to suggest that the Augustan heroic couplet bears no relationship to other phenomena in early eighteenth-century English culture, that the couplet might just as easily have been used by, say, the Beowulf poet. But the implications are much broader: indeed, as Henri Meschonnic has shown so forcefully in his Critique du rythme, there is no prosodic form that isn't, at least to some degree, historically bound and culture-specific. The dominance of the alexandrine in French poetry from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, for example, has to do, not with the intrinsic value of a twelve-syllable line, governed by specific rules as to caesures and stress, but with specific relationships between poetry and discourse. Similarly, as Anthony Easthope has argued, a seemingly neutral and omnipresent form like iambic pentameter in English is not without ideological base. First used by Chaucer in the fourteenth century, the pentameter then went underground, remerging in Wyatt and Surrey's adaptations of the Italian sonnet in Tottel's Miscellany (1557), and quickly becoming the verse form, replacing earlier accentual verse, where stress-count was not necessarily matched by the proportional number of syllables per line. And Easthope observes:

On the one side, as the name proclaims, iambic pentameter reaches back to the quantitative metre of Greek and Latin and the model of binarily contrasted syllables arranged in "feet": on the other, the non-metric intonation approximates to the abstract pattern and thus the native language is brought into relation with the classical model. . . . The ascendency of pentameter relegates the older accentual metre to a subordinate or oppositional position in which it has remained ever since: the appropriate metre for nursery rhymes, the lore of schoolchildren, ballads, industrial folk song and even, more recently, the football chant. (AE 65)

How the Renaissance model, say, the iambic pentameter sonnet, gradually gives way to the rhetorical model of the heroic couplet, the "transparency" model of Romantic blank verse with its identification of the reader with the speaker so that "enunciation" itself is "semanticized" and made "iconic" (AE 9), and finally the modernist collage of Pound's Cantos, where the pentameter and linearity itself break down into a fragmented surface that "foregrounds and insists upon the materiality of the signifier" (AE 140), is convincingly, if somewhat schematically, demonstrated by Easthope.

But what happens after modernism? Easthope suggests that we have now moved from the "free verse" of Eliot (actually not at all free but a series of deviations from established norms) and the fragmented collage surface of the Cantos to what he calls intonational metre, which is to say the mimesis of actual speech, whose intonation "is determined phonetically, syntactically, and semantically" (AE 153). Easthope talks of the "tone-units" of contemporary poetry, these units being more or less the "breath-groups" (Olson) or "utterances" (Lawrence) of earlier proponents of free verse. But, as Easthope himself notes, "intonation can only be defined for speech, not writing, since writing can always be spoken aloud in different ways" (AE 153).

And therein lies the rub: as the speech-based poetics of midcentury has given way, more and more, to the foregrounding of the materiality
of the written sign itself,³⁹ a prosody based on intonational contours has become increasingly problematic. The emphasis on the moment of enunciation (at best variable and transitory) now seems a questionable procedure, whether for the poet or the reader. For such “momentary” or “instantaneous” rhythm suggests that there is first an experience, something lived and felt out there, and only then and secondarily its verbal rendering.⁴⁰ But this doctrine goes counter to everything poststructuralist theory has taught us: if writing is regarded, not as the linear representation of a prior “full” or “originally” speech, but as what Derrida calls a “sequence of differences,” a sequence in which the phonemic, graphemic, and ideographic elements of language are brought into play,⁴¹ then we may expect to find a poetic composition that is neither conventionally metrical on the one hand, nor breath-determined or “intonational” on the other.

What does such “writerly” prosodic form look like? One possibility—and this is probably the most common postmodern practice—is to take the existing meters and stanza forms and to treat them parodically. A witty poem by John Ashbery called “The Songs We Know Best,” for example, begins as follows:

Just like a shadow in an empty room
Like a breeze that’s pointed from beyond the tomb
Just like a project of which no one tells—
Or didja really think that I was somebody else?

Your clothes and pantlegs lookin’ out of shape
Shape of the body over which they drape
Body which has acted in so many scenes
But didja ever think of what that body means?⁴²

The thrust of such parody is strongly intertextual: we read Ashbery’s rhyming tetrameter quatrains, not only against pre-Raphaelite and nineties love poems with their ballad stanzas and their predictable rhyming of “breeze” and “trees,” “room” and “tomb,” “shape” and “drape,” but also against those familiar popular songs that refer to shadows “in an empty room,” to breezes blowing “from beyond the tomb,” to mysterious body shapes and mistaken identities. All such allusions are gently mocked in Ashbery’s “song we know best” even as they are recalled with great fondness. Ashbery uses sonnet and sestina, haiku and pantoum in similar ways, but what is not always understood is that his free verse and prose poems, which make up the bulk of his work, are also send-ups of various sorts. “Business Personal’s,” for example, which I discuss in detail in the next chapter, is a kind of mock-Whitmanian ode, its long and loose (6- and 7-stress) free-verse lines poising the Sublime only to deflate and burlesque it in intricate ways.

A second way of approaching the question of metrics—and this will be my subject here—is to maintain the counting principle inherent in meter but to count, not feet or stresses or vowel lengths or even syllables, but some other more elusive quantity. What has been called constraining or procedureality is not equivalent to the concept of rule in traditional metrics, where the choice of, say, ottava rima sends a definite signal to the audience that every stanza will have eight lines of iambic pentameter, rhyming abababab. Rather, a procedural poetics, which can, incidentally, apply equally well to “prose” and “verse” (the distinction between them being much less important than the concern for language as a site of paragrammatic play, of the sedimentation of verbal, phonemic, and graphemic traces in interaction), is primarily generative, the constraint determining, not what is already fixed as a property of the text, but how the writer will proceed with his composition. Since the notion of procedureality has been developed most fully by the French literary group called Oulipo, the acronym for the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle founded at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, I shall begin with this important alternative poetics.

II

Oulipo, as its name indicates, was designed not as a movement but primarily as a workshop, whose members—poets, novelists, scientists, mathematicians, philosophers—could come together to discover new ways of creating literature. Its early membership included such important writers as Italo Calvino, Jacques Roubaut, Georges Perec, and the American Harry Mathews, and while there may be no direct relationship or exchange between Oulipo on the one hand and American “procedural” texts like Zukofsky’s 80 Flowers or Cage’s Roaring on the other, the links between these poetics are worth examining.

Consider, for example, Georges Perec’s reinvention of the lipogram, which may be defined, according to Larousse (see OU 98), as “a literary work in which one compels oneself strictly to exclude one or several letters of the alphabet” (“lipogram comes from leipo, ‘I leave’). Although the lipogram was an important form in antiquity,³³ it evidently went into eclipse in the nineteenth century: the Robert, for example, ignores the word, an omission which prompts the following commentary from Perec:
This lexicographical ignorance is accompanied by a critical misappreciation as tenacious as it is contemptuous. Exclusively preoccupied with its great capitals (Work, Style, Inspiration, World-Vision, Fundamental Options, Genius, Creation, etc.), literary history seems deliberately to ignore writing as practice, as work, as play. Systematic artifices, formal mannerisms (that which, in the final analysis, constitutes Rabhlais, Sterne, Roussel...), are relegated to the registers of asylum for literary madmen. (OU 98)

What Pèrec calls "systematic artifice" is not just game playing. For one thing, as Jacques Roubaud has posited, "a text written according to a constraint must speak of this constraint"; indeed, "a text written according to a mathematizable constraint must contain the consequences of the mathematical theory it illustrates" (OU 12). In the case of Pèrec's novel La Disparition, for example, the lipogram used (the exclusion of the letter E throughout) functions at the thematic as well as the "lettrist" level since this is a novel about disappearance: thus, says Roubaud, the novel is "both the story of what it recounts and the story of the constraint that creates that which is recounted" (OU 12).

But even if the constraint thus serves a double function, what is its advantage over more "normal" methods of constructing a literary text? And isn't the Oulipo device—whether lipogram, palindrome, algorithm, or the "S + 7" method—a form of fancy rather than imagination, of game-playing rather than art? Perhaps the best way to understand the Oulipian emphasis on procedurally is that, as Marcel Bénabou puts it, constraint "forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources" (OU 41). And again, "linguistic constraints...directly create a sort of 'great vacuum' into which are sucked and retained whole quantities of elements which, without this violent aspiration, would otherwise remain concealed...the paradox of writing under constraint is that it possesses a double virtue of liberation, which may one day permit us to supplant the very notion of inspiration" (OU 43).

What Bénabou means, I think—and other Oulipians like Jacques Roubaud bear this out—is that whereas a rule (e.g., "A Petrarchan sonnet has fourteen lines made up of an octave [rhyming abba abba] and a variable sestet [e.g., cdecd]") creates a certain stasis, in that the projected poem must fit into a particular preexistent mold, a constraint, which ideally gives rise to a single text only, can, as Roubaud says, "tend toward multiplicity." It prompts the author to let the concealed phonemes and morphemes of a given text come to the surface and create their own configurations, thus allowing for what Warren Motte calls "the maximal motivation of the literary sign" (OU 17).

Saturation, by this account, is a matter, not of "authentic" emotion or "important" subject matter, but of verbal resonance.

"Never," cautions Georges Pèrec in Espèces d'espaces (1974), "use the word 'etcetera,'" an injunction that might be the epigraph for a manual on the poetics of constraint. In La Vie mode d'emploi (Life: A User's Manual), it would seem at first that Pèrec, refusing the "etcetera," describes each individual atom, that he subordinates nothing. The scene is a single apartment house at 11 rue Simon-Crubellier in Paris; each of the novel's ninety-nine chapters describes in the most minute detail the furnishings and activities in a given room of the apartment block (see fig. 5.1). The individual stories (La Vie mode d'emploi is subtitled Romans not Roman) sometimes intersect, sometimes give way to narratives of former inhabitants, sometimes remain isolated; all the characters, as well as the real people referred to, are listed in the Appendix, which also contains a chronology of those lives touched on in one way or another by their residence at 11 rue Simon-Crubellier or their relationships to those who have lived there. And further, as the Postscript tells us, the book contains dozens of found texts (not identified as such in the novel), ranging from extracts from Sterne and Stendhal to Mann and Proust, to Borges and Butor, to fellow Oulipians like Calvinio, Queneau, and Roubaud.

At one level, then, we can read La Vie mode d'emploi as a kind of Arabian Nights, a storehouse of exciting narratives dealing with love, revenge, murder, mistaken identity, fraud, and family hatreds, interwoven with the contemporary plot in which the eccentric English millionaire Bartlebooth invents for himself an entirely useless lifetime project designed to leave no traces (it involves a 50-year regimen for painting watercolors in specific sites around the world, watercolors that can then be transformed into jigsaw puzzles which Bartlebooth must solve, whereupon their backing will be removed and they will be returned to the place of origin where they will be erased so that the process comes full circle), a project that involves the inhabitants Valène, Winckler (minor artists), Morellet (an ex-laboratory assistant), Mme Hourcade (an ex-factor worker), and the servant Smauf. But what makes La Vie mode d'emploi such a startling work is that we never come to know these characters and that their lives, far from making "sense" or cohering in any normal way, simply take on certain shapes. Indeed, the elaborately minute descriptions of items in a given room (say, the picture postcards in X's collection or the engravings in Y's) do not characterize their owners, as would such items in, say, a Balzac novel; on the contrary, the more we are made to see, the less we know. "Pèrec's method," says Josipovici, "actually destroys the delicate bal-
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The key to Père's hyper-description—his endless cataloging of detail—is the jigsaw puzzle described in the Preamble:

> the perceived object . . . in the present case, a wooden jigsaw puzzle—is not a sum of elements to be distinguished from each other and analysed discretely, but a pattern, that is to say a form, a structure: the element's existence does not precede the existence of the whole, it comes neither before nor after it, for the parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts: knowledge of the pattern and of its laws, of the set and its structure, could not possibly be derived from discrete knowledge of the elements that compose it. That means that you can look at a piece of a puzzle for three whole days, you can believe that you know all there is to know about its colouring and shape, and be no further on than when you started. The only thing that counts is the ability to link this piece to other pieces . . . as soon as you have succeeded . . . in fitting [it] into one of its neighbors, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece."

This account of the jigsaw puzzle may strike us as simple common sense: we all know that individual puzzle pieces—the so-called “little chaps,” “double crosses,” or “crossbars”—have no identity until they are connected. But what we usually don’t acknowledge is that even the "realist" novel provides status for the individual "piece" only via the larger pattern and that, moreover, someone is calling the shots:

> every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other. (LUM, unnumbered Preamble, 191)

This argues for an intentionality and artifice quite alien to the notions of organic form, which I cited at the beginning of this chapter—Denise Levertov’s sense of “measure,” for example, as the “direct expression of the movement of perception.” And indeed *Life: A User’s Manual* is itself conceived as a puzzle, “designed, calculated, and decided by the other.” For the movement from one apartment to another in the novel is based on the knight’s tour problem in chess. As Père's English translator David Bellos explains it, this is the tour the knight, moving one square in one direction and two squares in a direction at right angles to the first, would have to follow so as to travel right around the 8 x 8 chessboard touching every square once only. Père extends the board, making

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But the chess game doesn't quite work. There are 100 squares on a 10 x 10 grid and yet the novel has only 99 chapters. The bottom left-hand square (1,0) remains empty: nothing, presumably, happens here. Chapter 65 occupies square (2,8), chapter 66 square (3,9). But something is missing: to get from (2,8) to (3,9), the knight would have to move through (1,0)—the empty square. Perec, as both Bellos and Josipovici note, has thus introduced a "deliberate imperfection," a Lucretian clinamen—an error or bend. For what should be chapter 67 thus becomes 66 and accordingly 100 is never reached, even as Bartlebooth fails to complete the project of reassembling the 500 puzzles (see DB 66–69).

The numerical rule and its deflection thus control the intricate and puzzling structure of Perec's novel. Number games play a major role throughout: for example, each chapter refers, in one way or another, to the grid-square reference numbers of each room: in chapter 61 ("Berger, 1"), for example, which is at grid square (1,5), a "sideboard of indeterminate style" bears "a bottle of Pastis" 51 (LUM 291); again, in chapter 64 ("In the Boiler Room, 2"), whose grid square is (3,0), Olivier hides the wireless set in a chest "whose slightly sloped top was pierced with holes that had originally been numbered -03" (LUM 303). And, perhaps most intriguingly of all, the final chapter (99), which makes clear that Bartlebooth dies without completing 61 of the 500 puzzles, is located at grid square (1,6).

There are many other kinds of number games (and alphabet games, charts, puzzle grids) in this novel, but Perec's purpose is not just to dazzle us with his showmanship, his trickery. For the purpose of all these puzzles is, as Bellos points out, to prevent "even the most careful natural reader" from seeing the structure or armature of the whole after he or she has finished reading the book. Thus Perec's "puzzle hides, as a jigsaw does, what it also reveals very clearly once you have seen it" (DB 76). Indeed, one of the revelations is that the author, supposedly absent from this most impersonal of novels, has been there all along in the person of the painter Valène (one of Perec's first pseudonyms in the 1950s) and that when, in chapter 51, we scan the numbered list of items to be included in Valène's depiction of 13 rue Simon-Crubellier, the word that emerges from what is a giant reverse diagonal acrostic is the word âme (âme or 'soul'). Contrived, tricky, Daedalian as it is the artifice of Life: A User's Manual, perhaps the text's ultimate contrivance is to teach its "users" that the soul cannot be controlled, that the puzzle before us cannot be solved. Indeed, the empty square (1,0) is there to remind us of the indeterminacy of the puzzling process.

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5.2 Georges Perec, 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier, as refugured by David Bellos, "Georges Perec's Puzzling Style," Scripsi.

III

What do such "empty squares" and numerical schemes have to do with postmodern American poetry? In 1974, as his great long poem "A" was nearing completion, Louis Zukofsky drew up an outline for a new project to be called 80 Flowers:29

Plan. Beginning at 70 to finish for my 80th birthday a book of songs called 80 Flowers.
Substance. Only those flowers I have actually seen and whatever botany I can learn in 10 years . . .

Form. 8-line songs of 5-word lines: 40 words to each poem growing out of and condensing my previous books. . . .

As to "40 words" C.f. Old Testament; tetradkys . . . . Also adding integers 4 + 0 = 4. Eight lines = 2 x 4 . . . . Eight 8-line songs per year would = 82 = 64, and adding integers again = 10 (years); 8 x 10 years = 80 . . . .

"Number-tumbling," Michele J. Leggott comments on this schema, "is usually near the heart of Zukofsky's poetry . . . . Numbers are something to work against, a form to transform as number-generated writing takes on its own life, spawning more numbers, other ratios" (RZ 14). In the Old Testament, Leggott notes, forty has a special value as the number of years in a generation (Judges 3:30, 5:31), whereas the sacred tetradkys (see fig. 5.3), the subject of a long passage in "A"–19, is the Pythagorean figure of divinity, the triangle based on the fact that 10 is the sum of the first four integers (1, 2, 3, 4), its three sides enclosing the universal 1 (the "central fire") at the center. Tetradkys was Pythagoras's name for deity; it is also, Leggott observes, "the root of tetagrams that contain the godhead's name in four letters," e.g., JHVH, Zeus, Jove, Deus, Deva, Dios, Odin, and Lord (RZ 15, 385). The tetradkys thus supplied Zukofsky with both 10 and 4; 4 x 2 or 8 is the Pythagorean number of love, and turned on its side, the infinity symbol (RZ 16). And 10 divided by 2 = 5 (the sacred pentangle) which gives us the 8 x 5 of each "Flower." 10

The result looks like this:

Starglow
dwarf china rose shrubthorn
lantern fashion-fare airing car-tire crushed
young's churching old rambler's flown
to sky cane cut back
a crown transplanted patient of
drought sun's gold firerimmed branched
greeting thyme's autumn sprig head
happier winter sculpt white rose  (CSP 325)

"Starglow" (Starglo) is a rare cream-colored miniature rose, producing fragrant blooms with pointed petal tips (RZ 93); Zukofsky's rose, Leggott suggests, is a hybrid of Starglo and Rosa chinensis minima, "the fairy rose (faery rose? fiery rose?)," which is a "dwarf shrub with small, single or double, rose-red flowers," similar to the Baby Rambler (hence the "dwarf china rose shrubthorn"), which, when cut back, renewes itself with new canes ("to sky cane cut back"). Zukofsky's highly condensed and elliptical poem presents this dual rose or rose-graft (white/red, cultivated/wild) as lighting up the dark ("lantern fashion-fare airing"); "lantern" relates to the various other lights in the poem: sun, fire, star, moon), but also subject to being crushed under a cruel "car-tire." But the "sculpt white rose" of the final line seems to survive such setback; "greeting" the sprig of thyme, cut back for winter, it rises ("flown / to sky") in the poet's imagination, etched against the "sun's gold firerimmed" radiance.

This is at best a cursory reading of "Starglow," 11 but it should be adequate for our purposes here, the question being why Zukofsky cast his flower poem in this particular mold, this 8 x 5 (8 lines, 5 words per

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5.3 Sacred tetradkys, as sketched by Joseph K. Perloff.
line) grid. We should note, to begin with, that according to conventional scansion, "Starglow" would have to be labelled a "free verse" poem, its stress count ranging from four ("to sky cane cut back") to seven ("lantern fashion-fare airing car-tire crushed"), its syllable count from 5 (line 4) to ten (line 2). Visually, too, for that matter, the line lengths are quite irregular.

Why, then, the Pythagorean scheme? In a very interesting essay called "Approaching 80 Flowers," David Lévi-Strauss argues that Zukofsky's organization is not of lines or feet or even of rhythmic units or cadences, as is normal in poetry, but of words: "In adhering to a 5-word count in the line, words are freed of the usual subservience to demands of syntax. The entire arrangement becomes more spacious, less linear. Words begin to move in several directions at once, in a grid—40 units to each poem, each word a unit." And Lévi-Strauss adds, "Words, unbridled, flex, shift from noun to verb to adjective to sounder, break to form other words, recombine, all still held in the suspension of words together. A multiplication of precise relationships between words, this 'flowering.' " If, in other words, we think of each flower poem as a 40-space grid, each space occupied by a single word, we can read the poem, not only from left to right, but from top to bottom and vice versa, creating new relationships between word units. Thus Starglow in line 1 goes with "lantern" directly beneath it, the "crown" of line 5 points directly to "sun's gold" in line 6, and so on. Syntactic relations are held to a bare minimum: almost all function words are removed as are active verbs (there is not a single one in "Starglow"). The poem is made up of elaborate noun and adjectival phrases, with heavy compounding as in Hopkins; often it is impossible to tell whether a given word is a noun or an adjective ("churching" in line 3), a gerund or a present participle (e.g., "greeting" in line 7). Indeed, syntax is subordinated to sound, which is the feature foregrounded; consider a line like

lantern fashion-fare aircrashing car-tire crushed

with its alliteration of fs and c's, its elaborate assonance of short a's, its rhyming on "fare," "air," "car," its consonance of "-tern," "car," "tire." So much chimering does this line contain that when the harsh sounding of "crushed" is introduced at its very end, the reader is jolted and propelled forward to the place where "crushed" meets "churning" and then "cut back."

The grid, writes Rosalind Krauss, "is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature, . . . the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface." But what is curious about Zukofsky's grid poems is that their geometric order is always at war with the "nature" to be rejected: as in the case of Perce's 10 X 10 chessboard, the grid becomes the occasion for a curious ostensible, exchange, and disjunction. The past participle "branched" in line 6, for example, encourages us to read the "-ead" right beneath it as a matching past participle, even though it is the kernel of the noun "head." Or again, words that should go together like "winter" and "white" ("winter white") are separated by a particle like "sculpt." The words thus act, as Lévi-Strauss suggests, as chords—a new quantitative measure (DLS 88). The 8 X 5 grid, with its allusions to the tetrakys and other Pythagorean and biblical figures, becomes, as in the case of Life: A User's Manual, an unpredictable system. A poem about roses: what could be more banal? And yet, in Zukofsky's hands, it becomes a galaxy of interlocking and magnetic words.

IV

A year after Zukofsky's death in 1978, IRCAM at the Centre Pompidou in Paris aired the first production of John Cage's Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake. Like 80 Flowers and certain sections of Zukofsky's "A," Roaratorio and Cage's other mesostic texts, of which the most recent is I—VI (the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures given at Harvard in 1988–89), present a challenge to the dominant free verse aesthetic of the period. But whereas Zukofsky's poetic experiments remain largely cult works, little known by the public or, for that matter, by the world of Norton Anthology discourse, Cage's are widely known, primarily because of his fame as a composer, an avant-gardist, a "great figure" in the art world. At the same time, Cage's poetics remain at least as misunderstood as Zukofsky's, primarily because we have not yet formed an adequate conception of what is meant by the term chance operations. The common wisdom about Cage's texts is that, in the words of Edward Rothstein, recently reviewing I—VI for the New Republic, "they are randomly put together." Cage, as Rothstein typically explains his technique, "once used the I Ching as his instrument of liberation—thus giving the choices of tones and phrases a semi-mystical aura as he tossed sticks according to the ancient Chinese oracle. But the aura evidently became less convenient the more exotic Cage's techniques became. Now he depends on a computer program for assistance, its spit-out numbers determining the locations of words and ideas and sounds." And further, in referring to the mesostic rule, which organizes the text of I—VI, Rothstein remarks: "Between any two consecutive capital letters in the randomly chosen words . . . Cage insists that neither letter
may appear in lower case. *This rule is purely lexicographical: it means nothing, particularly since the words with the capitalized letters are arbitrarily chosen.*

One wonders what Rothstein thinks Cage means when he explains in the Introduction to *I–VI* that, in any given line, he adds “all the wing words from the source text . . . within the limit of forty-five characters to the right and the same to the left,” and admits, “Then I take out the words I don’t want” (*I–VI* 2). Again, consider the basic rule for the creation of *Roaratorio*, as Cage presents it in the printed text:

Tak[ing] the name of the author and/or the title of the book as their subject (the row), write a series of mesostics beginning on the first page and continuing to the last. Mesostics mean a row down the middle. In this circumstance a mesostic is written by finding the first word in the book that contains the first letter of the row that is not followed in the same word by the second letter of the row. The second letter belongs on the second line and is to be found in the next word that contains it that is not followed in the same word by the third letter of the row. Etc. . . . Do not permit for a single appearance of a given letter the repetition of a particular syllable. Distinguish between subsequent appearances of the same letter. Other adjacent words from the original text (before and/or after the middle word, the word including a letter of the row) may be used according to taste, limited, say to forty-three characters to the left and forty-three to the right.

Chance operations, even though the phrase is Cage’s own, is a highly misleading term for what actually happens in a mesostic text like *Roaratorio*. True, the mesostic words themselves may be generated by an arbitrary counting device (e.g., “find the first J not followed by an A in *Finnegans Wake*), or as they are in *I–VI*, by elaborate computer operations based on the I Ching: but such nonintentionality, as Cage has repeatedly explained, must be understood as a form of discipline, forcing the artist to break with ego, with habit, with self-indulgence.

A given writing project is said to use chance operations in that, at its outset, Cage has no idea what words the I Ching (or its computer version, the Mesolist) will generate, what words, that is to say, he will have to use. Once the chance-generated letters and words are in place, however, their presence provides the poet with rules that cannot be broken. Like Percey’s 10 × 10 chessboard square or Zukofsky’s 8 × 5 lyric stanza, then, the mesostic text is the very opposite of random: it is, on the contrary, rule-generated, the cinamen, to use the Oulipo phrase, being that the “wing phrases” in each line are written according to taste, following Cage’s stated purpose of “taking out the words I don’t want.”

Let us see how this works in practice. *Roaratorio* is a series of mesos-

riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from sweve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Edensites.

Sir Tristram, violet d’amoars, it’s over the short sea, had passen-

core received from North Armoraica on this side the scraggly

isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderlight his penonile war nor

had topsawyer’s rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselves to

Laurens County’s gorgios while they went doublin their mumper

all the time: nor avoide from after bellowed mishe mish to

rautauf dhaarpatriesh: not yet, though venisoon after, had a

kidcad buttended a bland old isues not yet, though all’s fair in

vanessy, were sose seeoth wroth with twone navigation. Root a

peck of pa’s galt had Jiegn or Šen brewed by arclight and rory

to the regginbrow was to be seen ringsome on the aquaspace.

The fall (babababa)haraghtakaminaronnkonbronntononrrontuonthuntronvarthouahnwanskawooboomordenenturnuk) of a once wallstreet oldpace is realeed early in bed and later on life down through all christian minstrely. The great fall of the ofwall entailed at such short notice the pfjseuche of Finnegan, erse solid man, that the humptyillhead of humself promptly sends an unquiere one well to the west in quest of his tumptypyntumes: and their upturnpikepointandplace is at the knuck out in the park where oranges have been laid to rust upon the green since devi-

linsfirst loved livvy.
tics on the name JAMES JOYCE, generated by a "writing through" of Finnegans Wake—a reduction. Cage tells us, of its 626 pages (in the standard edition) to 41 or, in terms of tape time, to one hour. Here is the opening page of the Wake, as reproduced by Cage in the text edition of Roaratorio (fig. 5.4), followed by the first page of Cage's own text (fig. 5.5).

Notice here that although the choice, say, of the first word, "nath-andjoe" (see fig. 5.4, line 12, for the first J in the text) is generated by rule (choose the first word in Finnegans Wake containing a J not followed by an A), the inclusion of "wroth with twoone" as the left-hand wing phrase is purely Cage's decision. Indeed, it is quite possible to follow Cage's mesostic rule qua rule and produce a different version. For example:

nath-andjoe
rot A peck
Malt had
jEm or
Shen
the pfdschute
erse Solid
hurnpYhillhead
knocK
thE park
of false Jiccup
the FAther of fornicationists
Most high
hEaven
the Skyssign
Judges had
numbsOr
deuterononY (one
for to watsCh
futurE

In my version, the variety of pitches and long vowels that constitutes the "signature" of the original disappears as does the rhythmical mock-Irish chant of "wroth with twoone nathandjoe." More important: the duality of Joyce's "twoone" (two-in-one), which literally refers to the alternate biblical fathers, Wise Nathan and Chaste Joseph, but here in Cage's stanza also modifies "jEm / Shen," that is, the twin ("twone") sons, Shen and Shaun, of the novel's hero, H. C. Earwicker—this duality motif is lost in my version. (Even if my version retained "twone," for that matter, creating, say, the line, "with twoone nathandjoe rot," I
would lose the ominous opening on the emphatic word "wroth." Therefore, Cage's "writing through" also creates its own meanings, as in "judges / Or / deuteronomy" (Joyce's text reads, "before joshuan judges had given us numbers or Helviticus committed deuteronomy"), meanings that are neither random nor entirely rule-bound but freely constructed.

Klaus Schöning, who produced Raratorio at IRCAM and Cologne and edited the bilingual text edition, makes the following notation about form in his 1981 performance diary:

"A fugue is a... complicated genre; but it can be broken up by a single sound, say from a fire engine" (from Silence).

Paraphrase: Raratorio is a more complicated genre; it cannot be broken up by a single sound, say from a fire engine. (R 19)

This provides a useful point of entry into Cage's complex Hörspiel: it is a work that cannot be interrupted. And further: a work designed to suggest the complexity of Finnegans Wake" (R 75). Asked by Schöning if the use of Anthony Burgess's abridged version of the Wake would not have made his task easier, Cage responds: "No, no. The short Finnegans Wake tries to give you the gist or story of it. But the story of it is exactly what it isn't" (R 75). The aim, in other words, is never to follow "a single line," but to produce simultaneous layers of sound and meaning that correspond to the complexity of the parent text.

How to structure this complexity? Whereas the Wake is a cycle, beginning in the middle of one sentence and ending in the middle of another that can be combined with the first, a cycle based on Vico's theory of history and the circle of Indian Karma, the Raratorio is a "circus" ("there is not one center," says Cage, "but a plurality of centers," R 107), in which everyone can participate (oratorio thus becoming raratorio). What prevents this "circus" from being a free-for-all, however, is the observance of rule, the 5 x 2 "stanzas" pattern created by the vertical mesostic "line" made of the ten letters J A M E S J O Y C E. If this letter-string recalls a rhyme scheme (say, ababb cdccd), it is also very different, its aural and visual elements refusing to cohere. The name JAMES JOYCE, visible as a column on the page, is not heard at all when the poem is read aloud; conversely, the sounded e in "jHMm" or "hEaven" transforms the silent e of James, just as the /z/ phoneme of James can become the /s/ of "Skysign" and the diphthong /oy/ of Joyce can supply both the open /o/ of "Solid" and the short /i/ of "humpYhill"-head. Indeed, the sprechstimme, chanting, singing, and whispering used by Cage in the actual performance of the text are never fully present in the written version. Thus the normal hierarchy of speech and writing collapses. For is Cage's written text to be regarded as the secondary representation of his speaking and chanting? Or is the written text primary and the recital just one possible externalization?

Like Zukofsky's 8 x 5 stanza in 80 Flowers, Cage's mesostics call into question the possibility of syntacticality. "Thoreau," remarks Cage, "said that when he heard a sentence, he heard feet marching. And I think that sentences still clearly exist in Finnegans Wake. Whereas in ancient Chinese language the sentence— as we know it—doesn't mean it exists, because you're uncertain... whether a noun is a noun, or whether it's a verb or... an adjective. So that you don't know the relationship of the words. And a single poem can move as a single word in Joyce... a single poem can move in many different directions to appeal to the understanding." (R 85).

The poetic, for Cage, is thus a matter of making "it less like sentences" (R 85). Consider the following extracts:

Joyce:

The great fall of the offwall entailed at such short notice the pftjchute of Finnegar, erse solid man, that the humpYhillhead of himself promptly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his humpYtumutus; and their upturnpikepointplace is at the knock out in the park where oranges have been laid to rust upon the green since devlinfirst loved livy.

Cage:

pftjchute
sOId man
that the humpYhillhead of himself
is at the knockout
in the park

Despite all its punning, compounding, rhyming, phonemic play, and onomatopoeia, Joyce's sentence relies on grammatical logic: the Humpty-Dumptyan fall off the wall brought about the "pftjchute" of Finnegar, the once-solid man, his head coming to rest at the Hill of Howth, his upturned toes at Castle Knock in Phoenix Park, where the invading Orangemen ("oranges") have been laid to rest ("rust") upon the Green ever since the first Dubliner ("devlinfirst") loved the river (Anna) Liffey. Joyce's text can be "translated" in this way, even if no paraphrase can exhaust its possible meanings.

Cage's stanza rejects even this much logic, transforming the narrative into a word grid, where each unit ("pftjchute," "sOId man," etc.) calls attention to itself. The "knockout" out / in the park becomes, first and foremost, a crash of spirants and stops—/p/, /f/, /l/, /th/, /sl, /sh/, /d/, /l/—so to speak "knocking out" the nasals and liquids and drumming the long and short vocalic /u/ of "Pftjchute," "humpY-,
and
“humself” and the /a/ of “sOlid” and “knoCk” into the listener’s consciousness. At the same time, the elimination of connectives, realigns meanings; “pfitschute” now stands as a kind of appositive to “sOlid man,” a “humptYhillhead of humself,” whom the very next stanza further identifies as “Jiccup / the / fAther.” And whereas in Joyce, the subject of “is” (line 4) is the “upturnpikepointandplace,” in Cage, the verb refers directly to Finnegans, the “sOlid man,” the “humptYhillhead of humself.”

The effect of such condensation is to produce a text that defies any sort of linear reading. And further: the individual words and word groups are defamiliarized by the “musical” soundings of the piece, the intricate layering of drumbeat and thunderclap, waterfall and birdsong, Irish dance tune and frog croak, that weaves in and out of the composition even as the voice, first heard as a solo, continues its recitation. In his desire “to make a music that was free of melody and free of harmony and free of counterpoint,” Cage has “used [the] text [of Finnegans Wake] as a ruler” (R 89), transforming visual location into the temporality of sound. The actual procedure is extremely intricate, but we might review the main steps, as Cage outlines them.

The first step was to make a tape recording of the recital of the text, “using speech, song, chant, or sprechstimme, or a mixture or combination of these” (R 173). This provided “a ruler in the form of a typed or printed text and in the form of a recited text, both of them measurable in terms of space (page and line) and time (minute and second), by means of which the proper position . . . of sounds [might] be determined.” The word “Jiccup” in the third stanza, for example, is measured spatially at 4:11 (page 4, line 11), and temporally as 14 seconds into the hour.

The next step was to make a list of places mentioned in the Wake as those places are identified in Louis Mink’s A Finnegans Wake Gazetteer and a list of the page and line where the mention of each is made. Since there are so many places cited, Cage decided to limit the total number to 626 (the number of pages in his copy of the Wake), and these 626 places were selected by chance operations and tabulated. Next Cage commissioned as many people as necessary to go to the place in question and make a recording of between thirty seconds and five or ten minutes. The recording was to be made simply by “accept[ing] the sounds which are in the place you go to” (R 119); Cage himself traveled around Ireland with friends recording sounds of, say, dogs barking or chickens cackling or the wind blowing as the church bells ring. These sounds are then arranged along a ruler, again made by measuring the page and line where the place name appears in the Wake and transferring the ruler from space to time.

The place names thus generate one set of sound tracks. A second one was made by listing all the sound references in the book (fig. 5.6), reducing them by chance operations, and establishing families of sounds (as in fig. 5.7). These sounds are again transferred from their spatial position to a temporal one: for example, the reference to “the song of sparrownotes on his stove of wires” (FW 136, 1. 35) means that we hear sparrows singing at the corresponding point in time (c. 13 minutes) on the hour-long tape. But note—and this is very important—that at the point where we hear the sparrow song, the spoken mesostic text, which does not, of course, include all the sounds listed, is by no means referring to it. Cage would find such an obvious correspondence between the sign and its referent much too uninteresting.

Finally, a whole program of “relevant musics” was recorded on yet another multitrack tape. Joe Heaney, “the king of Irish singers,” was enlisted to perform and he urged Cage to include four Irish instruments—the flute, the fiddle, the bodhran, which is a drum, and the Uilleann pipes,” the latter to be played by the Dublin musician Seamus Ennis (R 92–93). Thus, while Joe Heaney sings such familiar Irish songs as “Dark is the colour of my true love’s hair” and “Little Red Fox,” Seamus Ennis plays “The Boys of Blue Hill” or the “Derry Hornpipe” on his pipes, even as variations on jigs, reels, and Irish drum sounds alternate with marzuras and polkas.

Place-related sounds, sound-references in the Wake, and actual musical sounds—these are finally superimposed on one another by a series of mathematical operations, the collection of sixteen multitrack tapes being reduced to a single one. “The material,” says Cage, “is then a plurality of forms”; it has “what Joyce called ‘soundsense’” (R 103). But doesn’t it matter, Schoning asks Cage, that the sound track often drowns out the reciter’s voice so that the words cannot be understood? From Cage’s perspective this is no problem, for “this is our experience in life every day. Wherever we are a larger amount of what we have to experience is being destroyed every instant. If for instance . . . you go to a museum where you would think that you have . . . peace and quiet as you are looking at the Mona Lisa someone passes in front of you or bumps into you from behind” (R 101–3). Accordingly, the layering of sounds in Roaratorio is meant to resemble, not “white noise,” as one of Cage’s composer friends suggests, but what Cage calls “black noise,” which is to say, “a sphere of sounds coming together.” But in keeping with the circus format of the whole, these sounds never coalesce or
LISTE MIT GERÄUSCHEN AUS FINNEGANS WAKE (KAPITEL I)
Die Zahlen geben Seite und Zeile im Original von James Joyce an.

LISTING THROUGH FINNEGANS WAKE (CHAPTER I)
The numbers show the page and line from the original edition by James Joyce.

03.04 viscer d'amours
09.15-17 visces from after boiled veal
03.04-06 a gondolier's quiets
03.06-09 a gondolier's quiets
07 a veal
08 with what strange voice of false peasants
08.10-11 farmo is flaxing
08.03-04 farmo is flaxing
08.11 farmo is flaxing
08.15 farmo is flaxing
08.16 farmo is flaxing
08.17 farmo is flaxing
08.21 farmo is flaxing
08.22 farmo is flaxing
08.24-25 farmo is flaxing
08.25-26 farmo is flaxing
08.27 farmo is flaxing
08.28 farmo is flaxing
09.02 farmo is flaxing
09.04 farmo is flaxing
09.06 farmo is flaxing
09.11 farmo is flaxing
09.14 farmo is flaxing
09.17 farmo is flaxing
09.21 farmo is flaxing
09.22 farmo is flaxing
09.24-25 farmo is flaxing
09.25-26 farmo is flaxing
09.27 farmo is flaxing
09.28 farmo is flaxing
09.29 farmo is flaxing
09.36 farmo is flaxing

CATEGORIES AND NUMBER OF ALL SOUNDS USED IN ROARATORIO
(Hand-written facsimile: Page 9)

A. LISTING THROUGH FINNEGANS WAKE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Part I</th>
<th>Part II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thunderclaps</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thunder rumbles and earthquake sounds</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughing and Crying (Laughter)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loud voice sounds (screams, etc.)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical instruments (short)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bells, clocks, chimes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns, explosions</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whimsy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals and particular birds</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Music (instrumental and singing)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds (in general)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>495</td>
<td>712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. PLACES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Part I</th>
<th>Part II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1210</td>
<td>1083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td>2295</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6 John Cage, “Listing through Finnegans Wake (Chapter I),” from Roratorio, page 132.

5.7 John Cage, “Categories and Number of All Sounds Used in Roratorio” from Roratorio, page 147.
merge; they retain their individual identities. Nor do the sounds heard in any sense “accompany” the words or provide a musical setting. On the contrary, word, melody, natural sound, animal cry, waterfall, and thunderclap remain independent of one another even though the sounds chosen by mathematical calculation exist somewhere in Joyce’s text. It is accidental, that is to say, whether the hoot of an owl happens to coincide with a reference to the “deepdepth / of multitudinological im-materialities” (R 58) or, say, with an account of how “girls fuss over him pellmell their jeune premier / mussing his frizzy hair” (R 60).

How, then, does a rule-generated text like Roaratorio position itself vis-à-vis the dominant poetics (or, for that matter, the dominant musical compositions) of the period? On the one hand, Cage’s procedurality can be characterized as an extreme formalism—the subjection of natural speech, free expression of emotion, the true voice of feeling and so on—to elaborate ordering systems. The superimposition of the sixteen multitrack tapes, the precise arithmetical notions, the exact transfer of a 626-page grid to a 60-minute tape segment, the consistent observation of the mesostic rule, even the transfer of the internal punctuation to the larger field of the page itself—all these operate according to the chosen constraint. On the other hand, and this is perhaps the trickier aspect of Cagean procedurality, the text produced in the constraints in question has little resemblance to one that observes the rules of versification. Take, for example, the third stanza of Yeats’s “Stream and Sun at Glendalough”:

What motion of the sun or stream
Or eyelid shot the gleam
That pierced my body through
What made me live like these that seem
Self-born, born anew?

Yeats’s balladlike stanza has five lines, with the rhyme structure a1a2b3a4b5. Despite its subtle rhetorical variations from the iambic tetrameter and trimeter base (e.g., the trochaic reversal and caesura in “Self-born, born anew”), the stanza uses sound repetition (both rhythmic recurrence and rhyme) to enforce meaning, the continuity of the former counterpointing and underscoring the complexities of the latter.

But in a Roaratorio stanza, say,

Jest
gregarious
field Marshal
prince
myladdr the slasher in his person (R 39)

the generating rule creates no perceptible repetitions (although the use of James Joyce means that each 5-line unit begins with a line having a j in it), no parallel sound tracks, no regular chinking as in “stream” / “gleam” or “through” / “awed.” And no doubt this “burying” of the device is intentional, an attack, as it were, on the technological base of the printed book, whose typography has ideally been, in Richard Lanham’s words, “as transparent as a crystal goblet,” and whose “linear flow was not, except incidentally, interrupted by iconographic information.”

The production of a written text on an electronic screen, on the other hand (and that production is complicated, in Cage’s case, by the layering of the verbal text with the sound texts produced on the multi-track tapes) creates a very different cultural artifact. “The transparent surface,” writes Lanham, “which guarantees the identity and stability of the conceptual life becomes opaque and volatile, dynamic not static”; the electronic word surface is “put into continual play,” challenging the reader/listener to interact with it (RLEC 32). In this context, procedurality provides a set of controls for the poet and, by extension, for the reader/listener who may perceive, often quite suddenly, what the “secret” constraint is. The resulting verse form is neither metrical nor free; the linear and syntactic forward drive of a poem like “Stream and Sun at Glendalough,” moving as it does to the climactic question about the possibility of rebirth, is replaced by a preselected time frame (in this case, a standard one-hour radio time slot), within which time/space are nowhere symmetrical but everywhere saturated. Like the Koch snowflake or similar figure of fractal geometry, Cage’s composition presents “infinite length crowding into finite area.”

V

In the past decade, procedurality in the Zukofsky and Cage tradition has become more common as poets have increasingly tried to come to terms with what Ron Silliman has called the “limiting claustrophobia” of the free-verse model (DRS 34). Silliman himself used the Fibonacci number series (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, ...) in composing his long prose poem Tyning (1981); the Fibonacci series, he explains, helped him to create an “oppositional series of paragraphs” (a kind of image of “class struggle”), for the series begins with two ones, which “permitted the parallel articulation of two sequences of paragraphs but also determined that their development would be uneven” (DRS 36). Thus whereas the first #1 generates paragraphs with 1, 2, 5, 13 ... 4181 sentences each, the second has 1, 3, 8, 21, ... 2584. Another procedural device used in Tyning is that “each paragraph... repeat[s] every sentence of its previous
occurrence," the repeats being rewritten "so as to reveal their constructedness, their artificiality as elements of meaning, their otherness" (DRS 36). When, for example, "Poppy's grew out of the pile of old broken-up cement" (paragraph #7) reappears in #9, the construction is inverted: "Out of the rockpile grew poppies." And in #11, we read, "Out of rock piled groups." The permutations of the text's leitmotifs here and in other Silliman works like The Chinese Notebook (which is organized into 223 numbered paragraphs, a format based on Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations) or 2197 (which has 13 individually titled sections of 13 paragraphs or stanzas, each with 13 sentences, each sentence in each section modifying a similar sentence in each of the other 12 sections) create a dense constructivist surface, the "I's consciousness being, so to speak, 'fractalized,' so as to heighten the artifice of absorption."

A related process characterizes Lyn Hejinian's remarkable My Life. When this "autobiography" was first written in 1978, it had 37 sections, one for each of Hejinian's then 37 years, and each section had 37 sentences. The (unnamed) number assigned to each section governs that section's content: thus 1 has its base in infant sensations, in 9 the references are to a gawky child, in 18 someone is "hopelessly in love," in 22 there are allusions to college reading, in the form of Nietzsche, Darwin, Freud, and Marx. It is not that these sections are "about" the year in question, for each is a collage made up of numerous interpolations—memories and meditations, axioms and aphorisms. Nevertheless, in the course of the narrative, the references gradually shift from childhood to adolescence to adult thought and behavior.

The writing of a life, Hejinian believes, has no beginning, middle, or end: it goes on as long as the author lives. Accordingly, in 1986 when she turned 45, Hejinian revised My Life, adding eight sections to the narrative as well as adding eight new sentences to each section, these eight spliced into the text at irregular intervals. Here, for example, is 29, with the eight new sentences distinguished from the rest for convenience:

Yet we insist that life is full of happy chance

The windows were open and the morning air was, by the smell of lilac and some darker flowering shrub, filled with the brown and chirping trills of birds. As they are if you could have nothing but quiet and shouting. Arts, also, are links.

I picture an idea at the moment I come to it, our collision. Once, for a time, anyone might have been luck's child. Even rain didn't spoil the barbecue, in the backyard behind a polished traffic, through a landscape, along a shore. Free-

This particular section has as its epigraph or leitmotif one of the optimistic clichés we associate with Hejinian's mother: "Yet we insist that life is full of happy chance." It begins, like many of the childhood sections, with a pleasant nature image: windows open, morning air, smell of lilac, chirping birds. But the mood is meditative, the time evidently "those troubled years" when babysitters came "directly from the riots."

Indeed, further down the page we learn that it is 1969, when "I could
feel the scope of collectivity.” The text presents us with small children, including a daughter who “had learned to think of a poet as a person seated on an iceberg and melting through it.” Yet, from another angle, the narrator thinks of hers as a “poetry of certainty.” Being a poet, in any case, takes place against the “yellow of naps,” and against what seems to be a new love relationship, a “friendship [that] became erotic.”

In this context, the eight new sentences play a curious part. Not only don’t they stand out; once inserted into the text, they are wholly absorbed into its momentum so that it is impossible to tell where the seams are. Some of the phrases provide new information (like the date 1969), some carry on the image patterning, like “The berries are kept in the brambles, on wires on reserve for the birds.” The point, I think, is that, as Hejinian puts it in the eighth new sentence, “many facts about a life should be left out, they are easily replaced.” This is precisely what her own text does: a given “fact of life” will be “replaced” or at least recontextualized so as to take on somewhat different meanings by being inserted between a new X and Y. And yet, as in a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic, the replacement strategies don’t alter the fact that the “pieces” are very similar—cut, as it were, from the same cloth.

At one level, then, My Life is an elaborate, one might say Oulipean, number game, with its $37 \times 37$ (or $45 \times 45$) square, each number having the appropriate tempo and mood assigned to it. And furthermore, the formal patterning is heightened by the repetition of the short italicized phrases placed in the white square that begins each section, phrases that are then permuted throughout the text, appearing and reappearing in different contexts. In 29, for example, we find the leitmotif of 1 (“A pause, a rose, something on paper”) and 2 (“As for we who ‘love to be astonished’”), embedded in the text, as indeed they are throughout My Life.

Why such formal artifice in what is usually taken to be a genre as “natural” as autobiography? I shall come back to this question but first I want to look at the text at the level of microstructure and see how the individual units themselves are structured and how they function in the larger picture.

The images invoked in this passage are largely the sort every little girl would notice and later remember: the wallpaper with its “pattern of small roses,” “the white gauze curtains which were never loosened,” the ominous “shadow of the redwood trees” outside the window and the sunset reflected in it, the “little puddle” that is sometimes “overcast,” indicating cloudy weather, the uncle with the wart on his nose and his “jokes at our expense” and the deaf aunt who is “nodding agreeably.” And further: there are the proverbs that adults recount to

5.8 Lyn Hejinian, My Life, page 7.
she could separate the pudding from the edge of the bowl before the center collapsed, spreading the pudding out again, lower, back to the edge of the bowl.” “You could tell,” adds the narrator, “that it was improvisational because at that point they closed their eyes.” That was improvisational: The pudding-eating ritual just described or something quite different? And why would improvisation make one want to close one’s eyes? Because one has seen it all before and it’s boring? Because the improvisation is frightening? There is no way to tell and, in any case, the scene now “cuts” to the familiar “A pause, a rose, something on paper.”

The recurrence of these leitmotifs (e.g., What is the meaning hung from that depend? The obvious analogy is with music, or Like plump birds along the shore) has an oddly reassuring effect. It is the poet herself who is pausing to put “something on paper,” something that is her written offering, her “rose.” In the course of My Life these phrases become markers, signposts around which much that is confusing in one’s life can coalesce. “What is the meaning hung from that depend?” can be taken as an epigraph for the whole text even as “the obvious analogy is with music” fits any number of “analogies” that come up in the narrative, and there are dozens of bodily forms that emerge “Like plump birds along the shore.”

Indeed, throughout My Life the italicized phrase-making serves to remind us that, as Hejinian put it in the title of an early book of poems, “Writing is an aid to memory.” It is the act of writing itself that transforms Everygirl into the author of the autobiography. Let us go back to the opening page for a moment and see how this process works. My Life opens with a classic Hollywood shot: the “purple moment” when the baby girl at the top of the stairs sees the front door open on Father, returning from the war, evidently (for this is what adults tell the child later) “younger, thinner than when he had left”—all this against the background of rose-patterned wallpaper and white gauze curtains. But the Hollywood shot would not include the sentence, “In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity.” The remark is gently satiric, pointing to the family’s need to predict what will happen, to control future events, to plan the transformation of “pre-necessity” into “necessity.” And this sentence is, in its turn, followed by the terse, “The better things were gathered in a pen”—a sentence open for a wide range of interpretations, for example:

The better toys were gathered in the playpen.
The better dishes (the good china) were kept in a special closet.
The better objets d’art were kept in a cordoned-off area, as untouched as the windows behind the white gauze curtains.
And so on. However we read "better things" and "pen," what emerges is that this is a family that makes discriminations between "better" and "worse" things, that is concerned with hierarchy, propriety, and order—the "rigidity which never intrudes," as we read a few lines further down—and that the narrator recalls registering a certain puzzlement about these things.

But these implications are never pressed or even clarified. Rather, new sentences are introduced that are as equivocal semantically as they are normal grammatically. "The plush must be worn away": there's a sentence anyone can construe. But what plush? From a stuffed animal? A sofa? And who is saying or thinking these things? Is the "she" who "stepped into people's gardens to pinch off cuttings from their geraniums and succulents" the girl herself or her mother or someone else? Here the cause is cited—the stepping into other people's gardens so as to pinch off cuttings—but note that the cause is separated both from the agent and from the result. For we never know whether the neighbors catch "her" taking their cuttings or even who "she" is. We only know that in this "Wool station" (elderly aunts knitting and "nodding, agreeably"), "the afternoon happens, crowded and therefore endless." Crowded with what? Well, as the preceding sentence tells us, "Long time lines trail behind every idea, object, person, pet, vehicle, event." Everything finally matters but how and to whom? "If only you could touch," says the narrator, "or, even, catch those gray great creatures"—a reference, perhaps, to the clouds above reflected in those puddles but also, quite possibly, to imaginary creatures read about in children's books or emerging from the narrator's "radio days."

Throughout My Life, secrets seem about to be revealed, enigmas about to be clarified, but the moment of revelation never comes. In the final sections of the expanded My Life, the familiar leitmotifs—"What is the meaning hung from that depend," "The obvious analogy is with music"—recur and almost cushion the reader's recognition that nothing has been or is going to be resolved. "I confess candidly," says the narrator, "that I was adequately happy until I was asked if I was," the question, evidently, having been put to her on a trip to the Soviet Union. But then, "happiness is worthless, my grandfather assured me when he was very old, he had never sought it for himself or for my father, it had nothing to do with whether or not a life is good. The fear of death is residue, its infinity overness, equivalence—an absolute." (ML 115). And the final sentence of the book is "Reluctance such that it can't be filled."

This reluctance, this deferral of meaning and denial of plenitude, is central to Hejinian's conception of writing. "Where once one sought a vocabulary for ideas," Hejinian remarked in an early essay, "now one seeks ideas for vocabularies." "My morphemes mourned events is one of the text's leitmotifs, and indeed Hejinian really does filter "events" through the morphemes of their articulation. Here is autobiography that not only calls attention to the impossibility of charting the evolution of a coherent "self," the psychological motivation for continued action, but one that playfully deconstructs the packaged model crowding the bookstore shelves today—the autobiography, say, of Nancy Reagan or Shelley Winters, of Lee Iacocca or the Kennedys' chauffeur. In the popular imagination, after all, autobiography is the form in which you explain how you got where you are now. Ancestry and childhood invariably play a role as do, in most cases, schooling and the friction with one's childhood and teenage peers. In popular autobiography, these tentative forays toward separation invariably lead, sooner or later, to the Big Break followed by the Big Gamble and often by the Big Mistake(s).

Again, in popular or what we might call "informational" autobiography, language is largely and intentionally transparent, a vehicle used to convey facts, detail events, and produce, here and there, rhetorical flourishes that demand our attention. The emphasis remains on event and character—the shaping of a life according to social and cultural norms and constraints. It is this mode that My Life calls into question, refusing, as it does, to go for the Big Break, the Big Defeat, not even displaying the climactic moment of sex, of motherhood, of vocation. "Memory," says the narrator at one point, "is the money of my class." Which is to say, beware of the self-indulgence that "memory" brings, the endless dwelling on what happened or might have happened. The construction of "my life," for that matter, must compete with the constructions of others: "There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know 'what really happened'" (ML 21).

No "characters," no "events," and finally, no "self," at least not in the usual sense of that word. It is difficult, reading My Life, to define the "I" of Lyn Hejinian, the particular person that she is, although of course the narrator's verbal habits and references do convey an identifiable voice and style. But compared to, say, Yeats's autobiography or Henry Adams's or even William Carlos Williams's, Hejinian displays a studied refusal to engage in introspection, a steady suspicion of Romantic self-consciousness. As the narrator remarks wittily in 12, "Now that I was 'old enough to make my own decisions,' I dressed like everyone else" (ML 36).

What remains individual, however, is the construction of the artwork that "my life," any life, can prompt. For after all, even a pheme
can make a difference as when we come across such phrases as “seeming is believing” or “x plus you.” Accordingly, the permuted phrases, many of them with quotes inside the quotes so as to signal the endless clichéing of language—As for me “who love to be astonished,” When one travels one might “hit” a storm, What memory is not a “gripping” thought—work to create an intricate network, a highly wrought textuality that is enhanced by the strictness of the autobiography’s number system: 45 × 45, each unit having its square white box containing the key phrase. My Life thus becomes, oddly, My Art or My Writing, the natural giving way to the artificial, the individual self to the body of words.

The pleasure of Hejinian’s text—and here we come back to the larger issue of the rule-generated text in late-twentieth-century writing—has less to do with what happens to her protagonist in the course of the “story” than with the reader’s discovery that, however random and disjunctive the book’s events, conversations, aphorisms, and commentaries seem to be at the level of microstructure, each unlisted number, when extracted, gives us a key to the behavior of “Lyn” at age x or y. Or does it? As in the case of Perec’s Life: A User’s Manual, My Life introduces a certain “bend” or clinamen into the carefully articulated mathematical structure. In 29, for example, the opening sentence with its reference to “brown and chirping trills of birds” could just as well be the opening sentence of number 3 or 4, and many other sentences and phrases—“The berries are kept in the brambles, on wires on reserve for birds.” “The big trees catch all the moisture from what seems like a dry night”—defy the text’s larger number system so that the “saturated structure” (ML 99) of My Life cannot be replicated.

The goal of such procedural writing may well be, as Michel Butor has put it, “to escape the poem that sticks to the poet like a suit of clothing (even if it is a ‘splendid’ one), so as to try, in a structure that is very confining and yet very rich in formal relations, a more profound poetic grammar.” “Mathematics,” according to this way of thinking (see OU 93), “repairs the ruin of rules.” It also repairs, we might add, the “ruin” of a “free verse” determined primarily by speech rhythm and “natural” pause—a speech rhythm used brilliantly by the Modernist poets and their heirs of the fifties and sixties but now increasingly problematic as “authentic voice” models and “natural speech” paradigms show increasing signs of strain. A pause, a rose, something on paper: something, perhaps, that takes us from the impasse of “free speech” rhythms to the “rhythm of cognition” (ML 92).

6

How It Means:

Making Poetic Sense in Media Society

Regard for the object rather than for communication is suspect in any expression: anything specific, not taken from pre-existent patterns, appears inconsiderate, a symptom of eccentricity, almost of confusion. . . . only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches [people] as familiar.

—Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia

Each morning you have to break through the dead rubble afresh so as to reach the living warm seed.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value

In a recent appraisal of “the ‘Language’ school of American poetry” for Textual Practice, the British critic Rod Mengham cites a long extract from Charles Bernstein’s “Fear of Flipping” and comments:

[This poem] seeks refuge in the unsuspected, in a trial of wits with the reader for whom the experience of reading a poem is usually a preparation to solve its difficulties, to formulate its meaning and thus to translate it into other words. Clearly, this poem will not submit to any design except the need to delay that second stage of reading, the reduction to sense, and it derives nearly all its vitality from the need for evasive action. . . . “Fear of Flipping” . . . is so monotonous in register and has such a limited range of rhythms that the reader is only very faintly instructed in the composition of ideas. (My italics)

What interests me here is that in a journal as sophisticated as Textual Practice, a journal produced, after all, under the sign of those theories (e.g., the Frankfurt school, Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida), whose common ground is that the “difficulties” of texts are not to be “solved,” that their meanings are not to be “formulated,” “reduced[ed] to sense,” or “translated into other words,” and that a poem is not a vehicle for “instruct[ion] in the composition of ideas,” we are witnessing, once again, a kind of pre–New Critical conception of literature as the verbal vehicle for a prior “subject matter.” Indeed, the old battle that Cleanth Brooks was fighting in his famous essay of 1947, “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” has by no means been won. In that essay, Brooks argued:

The conventional terms [for reading poetry] are much worse than inadequate: they are positively misleading in their implication that the
nate the confusion between a sign and its object. The plane surface bearing the visual constellation "silenzio" does not, in fact, have the same properties as the term silence. Similarly, Wendy Steiner notes that "Semiotically...concrete art is a contradiction in terms. Paintings and poems by definition are signs rather than things, except in the sense that ultimately a sign is a thing: a poem that is literally a tree or a rose is not a poem but that tree or rose." All that visual poetry can really do, Steiner argues, is to maximize "iconic properties at the expense of symbolic ones," "Res Poetica," pp. 59–51.


24. In his early manifesto "From Line to Constellation" (1954), Eugen Omri, writes, "Restriction in the best sense—concentration and simplification—is the very essence of poetry" (MES 7). In "The Poem as a Functional Object" (1960), he explains this theorem as follows: "The purpose of reduced language is not the reduction of language itself but the achievement of greater flexibility and freedom of communication (with its inherent need for rules and regulations). The resulting poems should be, if possible, as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs" (MES 69–70).

25. Note that this formula for "reduced language" is by no means comparable to the "simple" rebus devices of Brecht. And the "pastiche of signs, schoolbooks, learning devices, and so on. For in Concrete poetry, the emphasis is still on structure, on the use of letters, numbers, formal figuration to make a beautiful art construct.

26. McCaffery’s "concretist" experiments are extremely varied; see esp. Ow’s Wait and other poems (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1975) and Panomatic (Toronto: Blew Ointment Press, 1984).


28. Johann Drucker, The Word Made Flesh (Cambridge, MA: Druckwerk, 1989). "Druckwerk" is the name Drucker has chosen for her own press. The colophon reads: "This book was printed by Johann Drucker between December 1988 and January 1989 in the sometimes torrid, frequently frigid, basement of Adams House at the Bow and Arrow Press... The paper is Mohawk Superfine and the type is some of everything linear." The edition had 55 copies.

29. Drucker’s earlier Through Light and the Alphabet (Berkeley: Druckwerk, 1986), printed in an edition of 50 copies, the “normal” printface of the opening page evolves, as soon as the first page is turned into something else: double-sized boldface letters start to jump out from the words and form their own words. As the "story" continues, alternate words are introduced along with extra lines (in miniature print), italics, and so on. On the last page, typography brings together “the possession of the site,” “experience,” and “response,” in a provocative and challenging semiotic structure.

For Drucker’s earlier work, see Twenty-Six ‘76 Let Her’s (Chased Press, 1976); From A to Z (Chased Press, 1977), ‘S Crap ‘S Ample (Chased Press, 1980), Against Fiction (Druckwerk, 1985), and Through Light and the Alphabet (Druckwerk, 1986).


31. I owe this insight to the author (letter to me, 4 May 1990), in which he writes, “The title of the red text... is ‘The Flesh Made Word’. The idea was partly conceived as a way to critique (humorously) the possibility of transcendence—here the referent is also material, thus, materiality is both the resistant form and the referent, returning one to the stuff on the page.”


Chapter 5


10. Robert Hass, "One Body: Some Notes on Form," Twentieth-Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry (New York: Ecco Press, 1984), p. 70. Cf. Ron Silliman, "Interview with Tom Beckett," The Difficulties: Ron Silliman Issue 2, no. 2 (1988): "The closed forms of the Academics (so-called) admitted their self-constructedness, but were non-generative, capable only of the repetition of the past in the face of the present. The open forms of the New Americans (so-called) concealed their 'madness,' but for a time offered a more fully generative response to daily life. Once, however, the creative euphoria of sketching out what the false model of a (non-constructed because 'natural') speech-imitating poetics would look like was complete, the same limiting caustrophobia set in" (p. 34). This issue of The Difficulties is subsequently cited as DRS.

11. The single exception is James Stone's translation of Sappho, rendered in four-line Sapphic stanzas.

12. See, for example, Charles O. Hartman in Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 11: "Verse is language in lines... This is not a really satisfying distinction, as it stands, but it is the only one that works absolutely. The fact that we can tell verse from prose on sight, with very few errors... indicates that the basic perceptual difference must be very simple."


free verse aesthetic and its subsequent hegemony, but the book is more properly understood as a disguised New Formalist manifesto pleading for a return to meter. Steele's critique of the free-verse model is often on target, but his argument is vitiated, at least for me, by his either/or model (a model he claims to derive from classical precedent but which explains away Aristotle's crucial distinction between verse and poetry [pp. 112–13, 166–70]), which regards poetry as written either in "meter" or in "free verse," ignoring the complex shadings of the two. Thus Steele criticizes Eliot's discrimination between "poetry" and "verse" on the grounds that "the discrimination deprives metrical composition not only of its claims to 'poetry,' but makes it share its claim to 'verse' with free verse" (p. 285), thus ignoring Eliot's actual practice, which honors traditional prosodic precedent even as it abjures standard meters; see note 10 above.


17. In "Reflections on Vers Libre" (1917), Eliot makes his own position very clear: "the most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language has been done either by taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse." And a few pages later in the same essay: "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in the void of the 'free' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse."; To Criticize the Critic (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), pp. 185, 187.

Eliot's own poetry fulfills these mandates: in "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," for example, the verse can be seen to "constantly withdraw" from the iambic pentameter; The Waste Land and Four Quartets are written essentially in the alliterative four-stress line, with iambic pentameter insertions and occasional longer measures. But, as Eliot himself says, there is nothing "free" about this verse.

18. Easthope himself approvingly cites Derrida's argument against logocentrism ("the view that speech is the original source of meaning and the location of its full presence") and his emphasis on the "graphematic structure of every 'communication'" (AE 13–15).

19. This is the assumption behind New Formalist practice. Timothy Steele, for example, declares that "What is most essential to human life and to its continuance remains a love of nature, an enthusiasm for justice, a readiness of good humor, a spontaneous susceptibility to beauty and joy, an interest in our past, a hope for our future, and, above all, a desire that others should have the opportunity and encouragement to share these qualities. An art of measured speech nourishes these qualities in a way no other pursuit can" (MM 294). And Steele cites Robert Frost's "The Aim Was Song" as his Exhibit A.
Notice that Steele takes for granted the poetry = speech equation even as he assumes that "nature" is somehow beyond cultural contamination, a universal to be "loved."


22. In "History of the Lipogram" (OU 97–108), Perec traces the form back to Lasus of Hermione (sixth century B.C.), noting that "according to [Ernst] Curtius, [it is] the most ancient systematic artifice of Western literature" (p. 100). An interesting ancient example is Nestor of Laranda's rewriting of the Iliad, denying himself the alpha in the first canto, the beta in the second, the gamma in the third, and so on (OU 100–101). Perec cites many German and Spanish examples from medieval and Renaissance writings.

23. The "5 + 7 method," says Raymond Queneau, "consists in taking a text and replacing each substantive with the seventh following it in a given dictionary. The result obviously depends on the dictionary one chooses. Naturally, the number seven is arbitrary. Of course, if one takes, for example, a 2,000-word dictionary and uses the 5 + 2000 Method, one ends up with the original text." ("Potential Literature," OU 61).

24. Meschonnic (HM 576) cites Michel Butor, "La prosodie de Villon," Critique, no. 510 (March 1973), p. 284: Roubard "a voulu fuir le poème qui colle au poète comme un vêtement (mêmes 'splendide') pour chercher dans une structure à la fois très contraignant et très riche en relations formelles, un approfondissement de la grammaire du poème."


27. The pages of the Preamble are unnumbered. But this particular discussion of jigsaw puzzles is repeated verbatim in chapter 14 ("Winckler, 2), pp. 189–91. Perhaps Perec wanted to remind us of the puzzle metaphor; perhaps he wanted us to relate puzzling to Winckler rather than to a generalized narrative voice.


29. 80 Flowers, published in a very limited and expensive edition (80 copies) by the Stonehour Press, New York, in 1978, has only recently been reprinted in Louis Zukofsky, Complete Short Poetry (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 325–51. Subsequently cited in the text as CSP. The entire text is cited in the poem-by-poem analysis made by Michele J. Leggett in her important recent study Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), to which I am heavily indebted in what follows. The notebook entries cited are reproduced by Leggett on pp. 12–14. The book is subsequently cited in the text as RZ. 30. Like Père, Zukofsky puts a slight bend in his system: there are in fact 81, not 80, poems in 80 Flowers (the first being an epigraph) and certain other variations are introduced (see RZ 74–90).

31. For careful analysis of the poem's etymologies, sources (Chaucer, Theophrastus, Dante, Rossetti), and word play, see RZ 90–103.


34. IRCAM is the acronym for Institut de recherche et de coordination acoustique/musique. Roaratorio has gone through many incarnations, having become, notably, a dance piece for the Merce Cunningham company as well; in this guise, it was first performed by Cage and Cunningham at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1986.


38. Cf. Henri Meschonnic: "Un paradoxe de la combinatorie est que, tout en étant à l'exact opposé de l'altéritaire, elle en partage le déni du sens comme historicité des sujets. Elle en partage le ludique, même si elle joue autrement" (HM 576).


In the standard Viking Press edition (1972), the text opens on p. 3 and the final page is 628, i.e., 626 pages in all. Subsequently cited as FW.

40. See R 141–45 for a complete listing of the participating musicians, the musical pieces played by each one, and their time of entry.

41. Cage explains: "I removed the punctuation too. And then sent it through chance-operations back on the page. So that each page is illustrated by its punctuation rather than clarified by its punctuation" (R 85). Thus commas, exclamation points, parentheses and the like are scattered around the page, becoming part of its visual design.

criticism is almost inevitably one of exposition and advocacy: the poets’ theories are cited, explained, and clarified for a readership not yet familiar with them. When, for example, F. O. Matthiessen wrote of T. S. Eliot in the mid-thirties, he gave an “inside” view of the “objective correlative,” explaining, as clearly as possible, what Eliot himself meant by the term: by the late fifties, however, the “objective correlative” was being reasserted as a later version of the Romantic symbol; see, for example, Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (1957; New York: Vintage, 1964), chaps. 7 and 8. Again, Black Mountain, which seemed to early commentators as a cohesive movement of like-minded poets, now strikes us as a fairly dubious category, a “Black Mountain poet” like Denise Levertov having little in common with Charles Olson.


Inevitably, the exposition-advocacy model also leads to detraction, not of the poetry as such, which continues to be accorded second place, but of the theory of language poetry. See, for example, Andrew Lawson, “The Short Revolution: Reassessing Language Writing,” *D’Amente 2* (Autumn 1990): 75–79.


More recent proto-Language journals such as *O. blek, Writing, Riddle Moon, Paper Air,* and *Talisman,* as well as *Sulfur* itself and *Tembler,* whose ten issues, edited by Lee Hickman, constitute one of the most important forums for the new work, have always taken pains to maintain a broader base than “language poetry.”

13. See *Sulfur* 22:180. Weinberger makes further exceptions of “Jackson Mac Low (whose inclusion in the Messerli anthology is rather like the Red Brigade bestowing honorary membership on Jean-Paul Sartre). Bernadette Mayer (whose presence in the Silliman book I can’t understand), and the two writers of crystalline narrative prose, Robert Gluck and Lydia Davis, whose appearance in the ‘language’ poetry canon is the greatest mystery of all” (p. 181). Which is to say that seven of the so-called Language poets aren’t Language...