On talking at the boundaries by David Antin

i had always had mixed feelings
about being considered a poet          “if robert Lowell is a
poet i dont want to be a poet          if robert frost was a
poet i dont want to be a poet          if socrates was a poet
ill consider it”

For the past few years, David Antin, who has been, at various times, an engineer, a
linguist, and a poet, and who is currently professor Visual Arts at the University of
California, San Diego, has been performing spontaneous “talk poems,”
improvisations made for particular occasions in particular places and then recorded
on tape and transcribed on the typewriter. At first, Antin thought of these
improvisations as “lectures” or “talks,” but one time, when he and his wife, the
painter Eleonor Antin, were driving back from Pomona College in LA to their home
in Solana Beach, they decided to listen to the tape of the Pomona talk, and Eleonor
said, “My God, it’s a poem.” Her husband agreed: “because i see all poetry as some
type of talking . . . and because ive never liked the idea of going into a ________ closet
to address myself over a typewriter.” “I see my talking pieces,” says Antin, “as
philosophical inquiries to which I try to bring the resources of language, not only
my own language, but natural language in its natural setting.” He is careful to insist
that such a “talk poem” is not prose, for prose is “an image of the authority of ‘right
thinking’ conveyed primarily through ‘right printing’—justified margins, conventional
punctuation, and regularized spelling.” Indeed, when Boundary 2, a Journal of
Postmodern Literature was preparing the galleys of Antin’s first “talking piece,”
“what am i doing here?” he insisted that the entire “poem” be reset because the typesetter had inadvertently set it up as prose with the “straight jacket” of left and right margins, thus obscuring the central fact that “these texts are the notations or scores of oral poems.”

Is this all pretentious nonsense? Anyone interested in the “boundaries” of contemporary “poetry” should begin by reading the heated exchange between William Spanos and Robert Kroetsch, the editors of Boundary 2, as to whether “what am i doing here?” deserved publication (see Spring 1973 issue). Kroetsch takes the conservative position: he argues that Antin’s talk-poem assumes that “to write at all is somehow to create art”; that a talk-poem “becomes poem as pure content . . . an avoidance of the problem of form,” and that it is “Naive in its avoidance of selection.” Spanos, on the other hand, admires the poem’s “structural rhythm—an interspersion of ‘story’ and speculation,” its “rhythm of an intelligent and sensitive speaking voice, which probably accounts for the sense of exploration it generates.” He argues that Antin’s text “reverberates with echoes of the past (the oral poetry of Homer, Plato’s Dialogues, the whole Parry and Lord Singer of Tales context) and is at the same time utterly situated in the present: McLuhan, the French “parole” rather than “écriture,” one gets a bit bored in the process of following one of Antin’s 20-page “philosophical inquiries.”

The Antin talk-poem is not, then, likely to serve as a useful model for other poets; in the hands of a lesser master, it might easily become, in Kroetsch’s words, “pure content,” “Naive in its avoidance of selection.” But then, as David Bromige puts it, “Who talks like David Antin?” And this brings us to the positive dimension of talking at the boundaries. Antin is surely one of the wisest, wittiest, most
perceptive and human “talkers” we have, and whatever the value of the genre in
the abstract, *his* talk poems do have what Spanos calls “structural rhythm.” In the
first place, the reader must not be fooled by Antin’s naive stance, his seemingly flat
empiricism, his air of being no more than a casual “talker.” Antin is never merely a
camera. Each of these eight pieces is organized around a central theme or image: it
may be the nature of memory and identity ("what am i doing here?") or the
question of mimesis ("remembering/recording/representing") or the meaning of
marriage ("a private occasion in a public place"). Each talk-poem seems to move
forward by purely random means when, in fact, the words continually loop back to
a limited set of variables providing at the beginning of each “talk.” Antin’s most
notable influence is Gertrude Stein, the Stein of “Composition as Explanation” and
*The Making of Americans*. Take the second poem, “is this the right place?” delivered
at the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia in lieu of an anticipated “lecture” on
Marcel Duchamp. It begins:

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when i was asked what i wanted to talk about  before i came here
  i picked up the telephone  in san diego and  bill miller
from the philadelphia art museum  spoke to me on the phone
  said “what are you going to talk about?”  and  i had
about five seconds to decide  and in the five seconds
  i realized  that there’s something peculiar about talking on a
telephone when you’re three thousand five hundred miles away
  which is approximately the distance long wined crows
take when they go directly from san diego to philadelphia
  and i remembered philadelphia very vaguely  as i kept trying
```
to think of philadelphia im an old new yorker as youll probably recognize from my accent which is fairly marked and

i thought of philadelphia “what does philadelphia have?”

This “overture” immediately introduces the notion of space (or sense of place) and sets the stage for the witty exploration that follows. The telephone can seemingly bridge space, yet Philadelphia and California retain their separate identities. The word “philadelphia” appears six times in these 13 lines (five times in the last five lines), each time in a slightly altered context, as if the speaker were trying to come to terms with the reality behind the name.

Once Antin has set up his key words and phrases—telephone, five seconds, philadelphia, ninety-mile drive, California—the rest follows with great comic gusto. The central question: “is this the right place?” initially produces a hilarious account of cross-country plane travel (on the top of page 28 the word “plane” and its cognates occurs in almost every line). For Antin, the West-East plane trip with its inevitable loss of three hours of daylight becomes a journey “into the past,” “into some time thats anterior to your own time,” and he describes with deadpan literalism how one tries to occupy oneself on such a journey so as to avoid the frightening sense of being swallowed up by time. After the bloody mary (consumed somehow much too early in the day) and the earphones and the tasteless food and the radio news, the movie begins:

and then they put on a movie and you don’t really want to hear the movie because there is a movie about a rodeo clown you know this because you see his face and its all white
and somebody is beating him up and you don't know why and you don't really care but you watch it and people come by and someone is computing his expense account next to you and you say to yourself "what place is this?" "is this a right place?" and you "where am i going in this right place?" somehow im over kansas and you look down and you say "this must be kansas because thats how long i've been travelling" but you can't see kansas what you see are rifts in clouds and you wonder "what place is that under there?"

Here the effect of verbal and phrasal repetition is to disorient both speaker and audience. What is a "right place" and what does it prepare you for? "I've always had this fear," Antin notes, "that experience prepares you for what will never happen again." And he introduces a new key word—"worth." What is college worth? What is "this place" worth? Antin now has us in the palm of his hand and so he stops to tell a story. The "interspersion of 'story' and speculation" is, as William Spanos notes, one of the central features of Antin’s talk-poems; in bringing narrative back into poetry he does enlarge the horizons of the closed lyric, bringing it closer to the oral tradition. In his laconic account of why and how he left the New York art world for the California art world, Antin provides a marvelous image of the fortuitousness, irrationality, and pleasurable confusion of contemporary American life. He recalls that he took the San Diego job by "accident," but once he set out for the West, he seemed to be living in a comic surrealist nightmare. In a Phoenix motel, he accidentally heard the news that Andy Warhol had been shot back East; later, his sick child needed a doctor, but the "medical centers" of Southern
California seem to have no doctors, at least not during lunch hour: “medical centers” in Southern California are beautifully designed and covered with iceplant. There are no doctors but too many dentists, and we hear anecdotes about one or two of these citizens. Trying to make his way in the New West, Antin developed the nagging conviction that “this culture develops feeling in one or in ones life that this is not the right place no matter where you are it isnt the right place because its not the right time.”

And so it goes. Antin is not bitter about these problems; his stance is amused, bemused, detached, skeptical. Life, after all, is like that. Thoughts circle back to his own “college” days, City College having been the “place” Antin attended after a stint in a bubble-gum factory. Was this the right place? After majoring “in about eighteen different things,” the poet felt wholly unprepared for “life.” But the system would not allow such deviation:

and i walked in with my program for a physiological psychological major or whatever it was and they said to me “you have graduated?” and i said “I have graduated? how could i have graduated? i didnt take hygiene 71” they said “you have graduated graduated” and i said “graduated?” they said “yes we will take we will accept zoology 32 as hygiene 71” i said “but it isnt i dont know all about those sex practices you describe in hygiene 71 ill never know and ill be sent out into the world whereas all ill know about will be the various nervous systems of the vertebrates” and they said “no no no youve graduated” i said “i havent
had math 61” and they said “math 61 is elementary mathematics
you’ve had the theory of complex functions out!” and
there i was not that i couldn’t support myself id been sup-
porting myself since i was sixteen but i wasn’t prepared for being
issued forth from this preparational device this institutional
preparation device i really wasn’t ready for it i didn’t know
what i was going to do what was i going to do with my life?

In this passage, one should note the brilliant variations on the word
“graduated,” and the subtle progression from “i didn’t,” “i haven’t” “i don’t know” to
“i couldn’t” “i wasn’t prepared,” “i really wasn’t ready.” By the time we come to the
end of this section, we know, of course, that Antin was “prepared,” that he was
“doing it all along,” that indeed, “i could do anything i wanted.” Well, then, is this
the right place? In the poem’s conclusion, a kind of anti-crescendo, Antin declares:
“i’ve never had the sense of being adequately prepared for it its always arrived
too early it should have arrived later.” But “accident” is the secret of art as well as
of life:

how do you know when you’re through with some-
thing? you know because the phone rang as somebody once
pointed out and then you can’t ever get back to it again and its
as ready as it will ever be because there’s no reason to go on
the telephone rang why not? now i might say of
this particular disclosure that there’s no place at which i can end
it without producing a kind of profoundly pornographic poetic
effect which i assure you i can do i could produce a vast
Not that this disclaimer is a sleight of hand. Antin has “done it,” although in a wholly non-traditional way. The strictest formalist would have to admire the orderly structure of “is this the right place?”, which begins with a ringing telephone and ends with “the telephone rang,” which starts with one of the central human questions and demonstrates that “it” (“any place”) is and is not the right place, depending on our angle of vision, our mood, the time of day, and a hundred other contingencies.

Despite his protestations to the contrary, then, Antin does rely upon a principle of selection. “Poetry,” as he puts it in one of the later pieces, is not just “talk” but “improved talk.” Whether “poetry” is the best term for the sort of “improved talk” Antin gives us is another question. His improvisational technique resembles what Levi-Strauss has called bricolage; “is this the right place?” sounds as if Gertrude Stein had collaborated with Mark Twain, injecting his humor, his dialect, and especially his version of the tall tale into her austere and immaculate verbal compositions. But whatever we choose to call Antin’s texts, their ingenious network of repetition, their interweaving of narrative and rumination, their presentational immediacy and speculative complexity make talking at the boundaries one of the most challenging “art works” of the mid-’70s.
talking at the boundaries by David Antin

(Home Directions: $11.05, $3.95 paper)

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These claims are surely extravagant, but Spanos understands what Antin is up to. Yet Kroetsch's doubts are not without foundation and I want to consider them first. In the special Antin issue of Vort the poet David Bromige observes that the real problem raised by Antin's "talk poems" is that when we see them in print, we lose the sense of immediacy, of voice, of gesture that accompanies their oral presentation. In print, the language itself must create the speaker's presence, testifying to what is "said." Traditional poetry used such devices as meter and rhyme to remind the reader of its status; here we have only blank spaces (breath pauses) and jagged margins as recurrent indicators that this is not prose. Try as one may to remember that the words on the page constitute "parole" rather than "écriture," one gets a bit bored in the process of following one of Antin's 20 page "philosophical inquiries."

The Antin talk-poem is not, then, likely to serve as a useful model for other poets; in the hands of a lesser master, it might easily become, in Kroetsch's words, "pure content." "Naive in its avoidance of selection." But then, as David Bromige puts it, "Who talks like David Antin?" And this brings us to the positive dimension of talking at the boundaries. Antin is surely one of the wisest, Wittiest, most perceptive and human "talkers" we have, and whatever the value of the genre in the abstract, his talk poems do have what Spanos calls "structural rhythm." In the first place, the reader must not be fooled by Antin's naive stance, his seemingly flat empiricism, his air of being no more than a casual "talker." Antin is never merely a camera. Each of these eight pieces is organized around a central theme or image: it may be the nature of memory and identity ("what am i doing here?") or the question of mimesis ("remembering/recording/representing") or the meaning of marriage ("a private occasion in a public place"). Each talk-poem seems to move forward by purely random means when, in fact, the words continually loop back to a limited set of variables provided at the beginning of each "talk." Antin's most notable influence is Gertrude Stein, the Stein of "Composition as Explanation" and The Making of Americans. Take the second poem, "is this the right place?" delivered at the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia in lieu of an anticipated "lecture" on Marcel Duchamp. It begins:

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and then they put on a movie and you don't really want to hear the movie because there is a movie about a rodeo clown you know this because you see his face and its all white and somebody is beating him up and you don't know why and you don't really care but you watch it and people come by and someone is computing his expense account next to you and you say to yourself "what place is this?" "is this a right place?" "where am i going in this right place?" somewhere in over kansas and you look down and you say "this must be kansas because thats how long i've been travelling" but you can't see kansas what you see are rifts in clouds and you wonder "what place is that under there?"

Here the effect of verbal and phrasal repetition is to disorient both speaker and audience. What is a "right place" and what does it prepare you for? "i've always had this fear," Antin notes, "that experience prepares you for what will never happen again." And he introduces a new key word—"worth." What is college worth? What is life worth? What is "this place" worth? Antin now has us in the palm of his hand and so he stops to tell a story. The "interspersion of 'story' and speculation" is, as William Spanos notes, one of the central features of Antin's talk-poems; in bringing narrative back into poetry he does enlarge the horizons of the closed lyric, bringing it closer to the oral tradition. In his laconic account of why and how he left the New York art world for the California art world, Antin provides a marvelous image of the fortuitousness, irrationality, and pleasurable confusion of contemporary American life. He recalls that he took the San Diego job by "accident," but once he set out for the West, he seemed to be living in a comic surrealistic nightmare. In a Phoenix motel, he accidentally heard the news that Andy Warhol had been shot back East; later, his sick child needed a doctor, but the "medical centers" of Southern California seem to have no doctors, at least not during lunch hour; "medical centers" in Southern California are beautifully designed and covered with iceplant. There are no doctors but too many dentists, and we hear anecdotes about one or two of these citizens. Trying to make his way in the New West, Antin developed the nagging conviction that "this culture develops a feeling in one or in ones life that this is not the right place no matter where you are it isn't the right place because its not the right time."

And so it goes. Antin is not bitter about these problems; his stance is amused, bemused, detached, skeptical. Life, after all, is like that. Thoughts circle back to his own "college" days, City College having been the "place" Antin attended after a stint in a bubble-gum factory. Was this the right place? After majoring "in about eighteen different things," the poet felt wholly unprepared for "life." But the system would not allow such deviation:

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In this passage, one should note the brilliant variations on the word "graduated," and the subtle progression from "i didn't,""
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Marjorie Perloff is professor of English at the University of Southern California and author most recently of Rhythm & Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats (Humanities).

The Fabians by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie
(Simon and Schuster; $12.95)

“Oh, the Fabians,” said young Rupert Brooke, who was a second-generation acolyte, “I would to God they’d laugh and be charitable.” Despite the looming presence of Bernard Shaw, who was an anomaly, the importance of being earnest was not lost on the first Fabians. Deliberately elitist and small in numbers (at the height of their influence there were only 700 of them in London), they were the white-collar brains trust which turned England leftward in the decades just before and just after World War I. Whatever their ideas and ideals—and they ranged from ascetic dreamers and determined social climbers to philosophizing homosexuals and flagrant philanderers—they were possessed by a shared sense of moral purpose which cut through political and intellectual disagreements and made them the technicians of the left. The original Fabians—the self-styled “Old Gang” who are Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie’s absorbing subject—had not at first been aspiring technocrats. Rather, they emerged in the early 1880s as a spin-off from one of the many splinter radical societies seeking spiritual direction and the company of congenial intellects.

The first Fabians began in 1884 as the “Fellowship of the New Life.” Led by Frank Podmore, whose real interest was psychical research, and Hubert Bland, who chased women, nine of the 15 members restlessly founded another offshoot, “to obtain information on all contemporary movements and social needs” in order to “help on” the reconstruction of society. The name Podmore chose for the new organization was deliberately obscure, a dubious reference to the Roman general Fabius Cunctator, whose tactics against Hannibal were both cautious and forthright. Soon their genteel causeries attracted inconspicuous political nobles who enjoyed spirited debates yet had no contact with working-class life and little experience at political agitation. But they had brains, and social consciences, and were looking for causes in which to apply both.

The MacKenzie’s pick up the new