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## On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy

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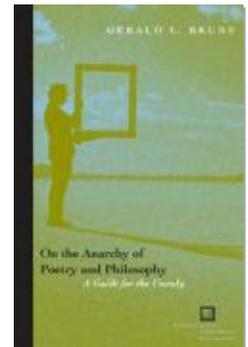
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## Poetic Communities

And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me—the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis:

“Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bel-lies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.”

So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they plucked and gave me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvelous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally, but ever to sing of themselves both first and last. But why all this about oak and stone?

—Hesiod, *Theogony*, 26–33

*Ecstasy.* Scholarly tradition pictures Hesiod, like Homer before him, as a great pedagogue.<sup>1</sup> The poet is in charge of a vast encyclopedia concerning gods and heroes (and also, in Hesiod’s particular case, everyday life). But from Hesiod we also learn that poetry itself is not a kind of learning but a species of ecstasy. No one studies to be a poet. No one asks to be such a thing. One is, for no reason, summoned out of one’s house and exposed to a kind of transcendence. Exactly what kind of transcendence is not always clear. One can imagine preferring the life of the belly where people who say they

are hungry can usually be taken at their word. Like biblical prophecy, poetry is a condition of election and a mode of responsibility, as much a curse as a calling since one is now hostage to a “divine voice” (or perhaps we would now say, to “the voice itself”). In an essay on the poetic or prophetic voice, “the voice itself,” Jean-Luc Nancy says: “Someone singing, during the song, is not a subject.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise Emmanuel Levinas: inspiration “does not leave any place of refuge, any chance to slip away.”<sup>3</sup> In ecstasy I am turned inside out, exposed to others, still myself perhaps but no longer an “I,” that is, no longer a spontaneous agent but only a “who” or a “me”: a passive, responsive, obsessive repercussion of the Muses.

*Partage.* In the *Ion*, Plato gives the basic theory of poetry as a condition of fascination, that is, of being touched, gripped, or magnetized (hypnotized).<sup>4</sup> Fascination is a reversal of subjectivity from cognition to obsession. Of the fascination of images, for example, Maurice Blanchot writes: “Seeing presupposes distance, decisiveness which separates, the power to stay out of contact and in contact to avoid confusion. Seeing means that this separation has nevertheless become an encounter. But what happens when what you see, although at a distance, seems to touch you with a gripping contact, when the manner of seeing is a kind of touch, when seeing is *contact* at a distance? What happens when what is seen imposes itself on the gaze, as if the gaze were seized, put in touch with appearance?”<sup>5</sup> An image is different from a concept. Seeing is conceptual: it grasps the world, holds it up for scrutiny as if at arm’s length; but in fascination distance (and therefore aesthetics) collapses and the eye suffers a seizure. It is transfixed or fixed in place by the image and can see nothing else. A visionary experience is always a condition of confusion in which the eye is absorbed or consumed by what is seen; hence the avid or the vacant stare, the stony, liquidated look. I am no longer myself but another. A true image is not a likeness but a Medusa-event in which I no longer know what I am looking at. Although still part of the world, I experience the world as a surface to be crossed rather than a place to be occupied. Ecstasy means that (starting with myself) I am outside of and uncontainable within any order of things, an exile or nomad.<sup>6</sup> However, this does not mean no one shares my condition. On the contrary, Plato emphasizes the contagion of poetry, whose magnetism flows from one to another like the spell that forms delirious Dionysian communities (536a–d). Fascination is a condition of participation in which one is no longer separated but is caught

up in an ecstatic movement, which is always a movement from one to another that produces a gathering or string, that is, not a dialogue or conversation (which would be a philosophical community formed by friends stepping in off the street) but what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a *partage*—a sharing or division of voices in which the divine voice or “voice itself” is multiplied by being passed from one singularity to another like rumor or panic (Nancy prefers the metaphor of the gift).<sup>7</sup> There is no abiding or indwelling universal spirit—no communion of “poetry in general,” as Nancy says—but only the singular “being-outside-oneself” that is received and handed on (think of the round of voices in traditional song—“the voice itself,” Nancy says, “can become yours or mine” [BP.237]). This ecstasy is what poetry communicates, not a vision or a revelation; the sharing of ecstasy rather than of mind or spirit, language or myth, is the essence of poetry and of the poetic community (PV.66/SV.236–37). Such a community can never be sedentary; it does not grow or develop into a unitary order. A poetic community has the structure of a series of singularities rather than a fusion of many into one.<sup>8</sup>

Hence the topos of poetry as discourse in flight—“panic” is Blanchot’s word for it: “Flight now makes each thing rise up as though it were all things and the whole of things—not like a secure order in which one might take shelter, nor even like a hostile order against which one must struggle, but as the movement that steals and steals away. Thus flight not only reveals reality as being this whole (a totality without gap and without issue) that one must flee: flight is this very whole that steals away, and to which it draws us even while repelling us.”<sup>9</sup> Poetry opens a hole in being through which every totality drains away. So it is not merely that the poet is outside and uncontainable with any order of things; it is that poetry disrupts in advance (*an-archē*) the possibility of any such order. As Blanchot says, incompleteness (*désœuvrement*) is its principle—“a principle of insufficiency” (IC.5/UC.5). Ecstasy, says Nancy, “defines the impossibility, both ontological and gnoseological, of absolute immanence (or of the absolute, and therefore of immanence) and consequently the impossibility either of an individuality in the precise sense of the term, or of a pure collective totality.”<sup>10</sup> In place (or in advance) of the settlement, the village, the realm, the social contract, civil society, liberal democracy, the total or merely procedural state, poetry opens up an ecstatic or anarchic community—a community that (Nancy says) “resists collectivity itself as much as it resists the individual” (CD.177/InC.71).

An ecstatic community assembles and disperses (as at games, festivals, and rallies) but is not meant to last. Incompleteness is its principle.<sup>11</sup> Eric Havelock has shown that an ecstatic community is what Socrates saw in the Athens around him: a vast theater, a performance culture basically hypnotic and anarchic in its operations and results: "Plato's account remains the first and indeed the only Greek attempt to articulate consciously and with clarity the central fact of poetry's control over Greek culture" (PP.96).<sup>12</sup> Whence denial of ecstasy became for Socrates the first principle of his "city of words," which is a totally integrated economic order administered by sealed-off punctual egos exercising rational control (our once and future philosophers). Recall that the starting-point of his construction is the critique of mimesis in book 3 (393a–98b), where *mimesis* is a mode of "being-outside-oneself" or impersonation rather than the category of representation that it becomes in book 10. The problem of poetry is not its logical weakness but its power to project people outside of themselves. Poetry is a dispersal or dissemination of subjectivities in which no one is oneself and everyone is somebody else, as in theater.

Here would be the place to recall Nietzsche's analysis, which neatly summarizes Plato's poetics (and anticipates Georges Bataille's): "Dionysiac excitation is capable of communicating to a whole multitude this artistic power to feel itself surrounded by, and at one with, a host of spirits. What happens in the dramatic chorus is the primary *dramatic* phenomenon: projecting oneself outside oneself and then acting as though one had really entered another body, another character. . . . It should be made clear that this phenomenon is not singular but epidemic: a whole crowd becomes rapt in this manner."<sup>13</sup> Belonging to a crowd (the first principle of theater) is a condition of rapture. Possibly mystics levitate alone. The ecstasy of poetry, however, is a social experience. In *The Unavowable Community*, Maurice Blanchot recalls that for Georges Bataille ecstasy "could not take place if it was limited to a single individual . . . : [It] accomplishes itself . . . when it is shared" [CI.34–35/UC.17].) Likewise Walter Benjamin: "Man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights."<sup>14</sup> And Benjamin quotes Baudelaire as follows: "The pleasure of being in a crowd is a mysterious expression of sensual joy in the multiplication of number. . . . Number is in *all*. . . . Ecstasy is a number. . . . Religious intoxica-

tion of great cities. . . .’ Ch. B., *Œuvres*, vol. 2, pp. 626–27 (‘Fusées’). Extract the root of the human being!’<sup>15</sup>

**Poetry: A Short History.** Aristotle’s *Organon*, or rule of discourse, gives us the purely logical form of Socrates’ city. Here a place for poetry is found by reconceptualizing *mimesis* as *mathesis*, or learning (1448b.4, 2–6), and then by laying bare as its deep structure a form of consecutive reasoning called *mythos*, or plot (1450a.7, 1–7). Poetry is now for spectators on whom it has a therapeutic or calming effect. Instead of fascination it produces or enhances an essentially philosophical subjectivity. Aristotle is thought to have invented the concept of the critical spectator whose experience of literature is essentially solitary and reflective. (As Gadamer has shown, the Platonic spectator is always ecstatic.)<sup>16</sup> What is at least true is that a principle of disengagement has been introduced into the theory of poetic experience—a distancing factor (perhaps we can speak of this as the aestheticizing of the poetic).<sup>17</sup> As a species of discourse, poetry will henceforward be largely a branch of rhetoric reducible to handbooks, that is, not so much a discipline in its own right as a technique of mediation in the service of other discursive fields (or, as Horace said, in the service of empire). Poetry is defined by not having any discursive field of its own (“the allegory of the poets” derives from theology). One can remark in passing (1) on Longinus, who affirms the ecstatic tradition but is himself lost to the world until the seventeenth century; (2) on the genre of the lyric, with its lethal erotic and satiric traditions (the one drives people to perdition, the other to suicide; Rome in fact passed a law forbidding satire); (3) on the classical tradition of poetic exile (Ovid, Dante, Milton, Joyce); (4) on the myth of the unschooled poet like Wolfram von Eschenbach, who says: “I don’t know a single letter of the alphabet” (*Parzival*, 2.115).

But what characterizes poetry throughout most of its history is its confinement to institutions not of its own making.<sup>18</sup> For example, in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* Ernst Robert Curtius asks about “the mode of existence of the medieval poet.” For Curtius “mode of existence” is a social rather than ontological category. The question is: “Why did one write poetry? One was taught to in school. A great many medieval authors wrote poetry because one had to be able to do so in order to prove oneself a *clericus* and *litteratus*; in order to turn out compliments, epitaphs, petitions, dedications, and thus gain favor with the powerful or correspond with equals; as also for the sake of vile Mammon. The writing of poetry can be taught and

learned; it is schoolwork and a school subject.”<sup>19</sup> The modern university’s writers’ workshop preserves this tradition. Curtius notes that the concept of the poet’s “divine frenzy” is preserved as a rhetorical topos. Pope memorializes this topos in the *Peri Bathous; or, The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, a parody of Longinus aimed at a new poetic culture whose origins are internal to the development of print technology and the new autonomous social spaces that it opens up: with the rise of modern cities poetry becomes a discourse of the street (the tavern, the coffee house, the periodical) rather than of the court, the church, and the school. The invention of the concept of art (in which poetry can now reflect on itself as if in a space of its own) is made possible by these social changes, as when Friedrich Schlegel characterizes the poet as “a sociable being” [*ein geselliges Wesen*]: conversing about poetry with poets and lovers of poetry now becomes a condition of poetry as such.<sup>20</sup>

But what counts as poetry as such? Beginning with the Jena Romantics (the Athenäum is arguably the first literary community of modernity and a prototype of the avant-garde group) this becomes an open question: as poetry ceases to be a genre distinction, poetic theories are now necessary in order to pick out a piece of language as poetic (see Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenäum Fragments*, nos. 116, 238).<sup>21</sup> So we get the onset of modernism as a culture of prefaces and manifestos. The distinction between theory and practice, or between poetry and poetics, ceases to be self-evident, as does the distinction between fragment and work. The poet Charles Bernstein says: “I imagine poetry . . . as that which can’t be contained by any set of formal qualities.”<sup>22</sup> It becomes what Maurice Blanchot calls “fragmentary writing” — writing that is “averse to masterpieces, and even withdraws from the idea of the work to the point of making the latter a form of worklessness [*désœuvrement*]” (EI.592/IC.403),<sup>23</sup> as if, 2,500 years later, poetry were breaking out of the Organon.<sup>24</sup> As Bernstein says: “I imagine poetry as an invasion of the poetic into other realms: overflowing the bounds of genres, spilling into talk, essays, politics, philosophy” (P.151). The Athenäum group is where this breakout or dissemination is first enacted as a program (the idea is, among other things, to make philosophy poetic and poetry philosophical). In their account of the group, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write: “The fragment is the romantic genre par excellence. . . . In fact, only a single ensemble, published with the one-word title, *Fragments*, corresponds entirely (or as much as possible) to the fragmentary ideal of romanticism, notably in that it has no particular object and in that it is any-

mously composed of pieces by several different authors.”<sup>25</sup> Imagine poetry not so much as a work of the spirit as a group experiment (recall Schlegel’s Fragment 125: “Perhaps there would be a birth of a whole new era of the sciences and arts if symphilosophy and sym-poetry became so universal and heartfelt that it would no longer be anything extraordinary for several complementary minds to create communal works of art”).

*The College of Sociology.* In Paris in 1937 Georges Bataille, along with Roger Callois, Michel Leiris, and Pierre Klossowski, began organizing a series of bimonthly lectures called The College of Sociology, whose purpose was to investigate the nature of such social structures as the army, religious orders, secret societies, brotherhoods, companies, salons, drinking, gaming, or sporting clubs, youth groups, even political parties (normally) on the fringe.<sup>26</sup> Crucially, Bataille will later (in *Le coupable* [1944]) add to this list the community of lovers and the artists’ community.<sup>27</sup> These structures are, according to Callois, ecstatic or “sacred” communities, where the sacred consists “in the outburst of violations of rules of life: a sacred that *expends* itself, that *spends itself* (the orgiastic sacred)” (CS.152). The sacred is not a theological but a social concept. Sacred communities are not part of the productive economies of modern capitalist states; or rather, whatever function or goal might be assigned to them in the bourgeois order of things, they are defined by what Bataille calls “nonproductive expenditures of energy [*dépense*].”<sup>28</sup> A nonproductive expenditure of energy is one in which there is no return on investment. It is a gratuitous expenditure, absolutely outside any economy of exchange- or use-value. It is predicated upon a principle of loss rather than on the accumulation of capital. It belongs, if anywhere, to the economy of the gift. Recall the essay on “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933), where Bataille lists jewelry, religious sacrifice, kinky sex, gambling, art, and, in particular, poetry as examples of the free expenditure of energy. Poetry is, he says, “creation by means of loss” (PM.30–31/VE.120).<sup>29</sup> In poetry words are not exchanged for meanings; instead they have become events of *communication* in the special sense that Bataille attaches to this word. Communication is not a concept from information theory; it refers not to the transmission of messages but to the contagious relation in which states of existence are passed along from one subject to another (Nancy’s *partage*). Communication has the structure of Plato’s magnetic chain rather than the give-and-take anatomy of dialogue, commerce, and

social struggle. In Bataille's words, communication is made of "contagions of energy, of movement, of warmth, or transfers of elements, which constitute inevitably the life of your organized being. Life is never situated at a particular point: it passes rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to other points), like a current or a sort of streaming of electricity."<sup>50</sup> At all events, in poetry words are no longer to be exchanged for meanings or things: they are now like images of fascination — moments of reversal that displace the logical or cognitive subject from its position of sovereignty and control. As Blanchot says apropos of Kafka: "The writer gives up saying 'I'" (EL.21/SL.26). Poetry is heterogeneous with respect to an order of things organized from the perspective of the logical subject. So we should say that, at least from the poet's point of view, Plato got poetry right (see Giorgio Agamben [MwC.5]).

*La Bobème.* Notice that Bataille defines the poet's choice in terms of "the destiny of the reprobate" as against submission to the principle of necessity. Imagine this destiny as a condition that makes poetry possible. Students of Walter Benjamin tend to be guarded about the fact that he was among the occasional participants in Bataille's College of Sociology (Benjamin's saintliness seems out of place in this morally and politically dubious environment). In fact in the spring of 1939 Benjamin was scheduled to deliver a paper, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," but his presentation was postponed until the fall, by which time France was at war; within a few months Benjamin would be a refugee (fortunately he gave his manuscripts to Bataille, a librarian, for safekeeping). There were in any case no more meetings of Bataille's group. However, as we have it, the text of "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" is remarkably coherent with both the letter and spirit of inquiry around which Bataille had organized his college. Benjamin's theme is social ecstasy. In the first place there is the thesis that Baudelaire intended his poetry to produce a state of shock (GS.1.2:614–18/SW.4:318–21). (Undoubtedly Baudelaire, not Rimbaud, was the first surrealist.) But perhaps more important is the mode of social existence that Baudelaire represents for Benjamin, namely that of the homeless *flâneur* whose environment is the street and the crowd. Benjamin says of Baudelaire: "the street . . . became a refuge for him" (GS.1.2:573/SW.4:42). In the street one is always outside of oneself, and, for Benjamin, Baudelaire is nothing in himself but is the consummate role-player ("Flâneur, apache, dandy, and ragpicker were so many roles to him") (GS.1.2:600/SW.4:60). And

again: “On the physiognomy of Baudelaire as that of the mime: Courbet reports that he looked different every day” (GS.5.1:419/AP.333). Moreover, Baudelaire’s poetry is “nomadic,” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of an art that is uncontainable within any rationalized order of things. Benjamin writes: “Around the middle of the century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. This change consisted in the fact that for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art, and the form of the masses on its public. Particularly vulnerable to these developments, as can be seen now unmistakably in our century, was the lyric. It is the unique distinction of *Les Fleurs du mal* that Baudelaire responded to precisely these altered conditions with a book of poems. It is the best example of heroic conduct to be found in his life” (GS.5.1:424/AP.336–37). Baudelaire’s achievement was not to have left us a novel.

Benjamin’s Baudelaire is not, however, merely the romantic artist in solitary metaphysical rebellion against a fallen world. He is rather the representative of the ecstatic social structure that makes him possible, namely the *Bobème* (GS.1.2:513–14/SW.4:3–5). The *Bobème* is the underground (by no means the first of its kind when we think of Grubstreet, Bartholomew Fair, and the Elizabethan crowd that begins writing—about the London streets—for the printing press; think of how Marlowe ends his days). Benjamin defines the *Bobème* as the hiding-place of political conspirators during the Second Empire (“Professional conspirator and dandy meet in the concept of the modern hero. This hero represents for himself, in his own person, a whole secret society” [GS.5.1:478/AP.378]). It is the world of low-lives, wastrels, criminals, prostitutes, and Balzacian destitutes—Bataille’s sacred realm of the “accursed.” It is where the gambler is deposited at the end of his run. Its defining genre is the detective story. It is also the condition of the modern poet’s existence. On Benjamin’s analysis the *Bobème* is a principle of modernist poetics (this is his Baudelaire thesis). In antiquity it was the ecstasy of the poet that, according to the magnetic theory, constituted the condition of the anarchic community; in Benjamin it is the anarchic community that is the condition of poetry. In order to become a poet it is no longer enough to possess (as if by nature) a certain kind of subjectivity (a dissatisfied memory is all one needs); it is now necessary to belong to a certain kind of world in order to take on the kinds of subjectivity that that world makes available—the man of the barricades, the painted woman, the beggar, the painter of modern life. (“In the guise

of the beggar Baudelaire continually put the model of bourgeois society to the test" [GS.5.1:427/AP.338].) At the end of the day Benjamin's Baudelaire is a kind urbanized romantic ironist, a transcendental *buf-fon*, a performance artist:

Baudelaire did not have the humanitarian idealism of a Victor Hugo or a Lamartine. The emotional buoyancy of a Musset was not at his disposal. He did not, like Gautier, take pleasure in his times, nor could he deceive himself about them like Leconte de Lisle. It was not given him to find a refuge in devotions, like Verlaine, nor to heighten the youthful vigor of his lyric *élan* through the betrayal of his adulthood, like Rimbaud. As rich as Baudelaire is in the knowledge of his craft, he is relatively unprovided with strategems to face the times. And even the grand tragic part he had composed for the arena of his day—the role of the “modern”—could be filled in the end only by himself. All this Baudelaire no doubt recognized. The eccentricities in which he took such pleasure were those of the mime who has to perform before a public incapable of following the action on the stage—a mime, furthermore, who knows this about his audience and, in his performance, allows that knowledge its rightful due. (GS.5. 1:429/AP.340)

*Black Mountain College.* Voice, Jean-Luc Nancy says in “Vox Clamans in Deserto,” is not an expression of the self but a projection of it. “Voice is not present to itself, it is only an exterior manifestation, a trembling that offers itself to the outside, the half-beat of an opening—once again, a wilderness exposed where layers of air vibrate in the heat. The wilderness of the voice in the wilderness, in all its clamor—has no subject, no infinite unity; it always leaves for the outside, without self-presence, without self-consciousness” (BP.243). In Charles Olson’s poetics the poetic subject does not reflect on itself but rather is projected like a breath (hence it is an “objectivist” rather than expressive or “subjectivist” poetics).<sup>31</sup> The poem is not the reworking or working-out of genres and conventions (what Olson called “closed form”); it is rather an event on the model of free expenditure (or “open form”): “The poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. . . . Then the poem must be, at all points, a high energy-construct and, at all points, a high energy-discharge” (PVO.52).<sup>32</sup> Crucially, this is an expendi-

ture of energy that is shaped by the poet's breath—the poetic line comes not from a manual of prosody but “(I swear it) from the breath of the poet, from the breathing of the man who writes” (PVO.54), which Olson identifies as “voice in its largest sense” (PVO.58). (Compare Adorno on breath as a musical unit in Schönberg.)<sup>33</sup> In composition, Olson says, the typewriter allows the poet to score the voice of the poem, so that poetry, whatever else it might be, becomes the communication of voice: “It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of the syllables, the juxtapositions even of part of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work” (PVO.57–58).

So the poem is not just composition but performance, and understanding the poem will mean performing it rather than subjecting it to exegesis. Sherman Paul compares the composition of projectivist verse to, among other things, action painting and jazz: “Projective verse is not only a poetics of presentation but a poetics of present experience, of enactment. It replaces spectatorship with participation, and brings the whole self—the single intelligence: body, mind, soul—to the activity of creation. Dance, which Olson appreciated because it recalls us to our bodies and [because in it] ‘we use ourselves,’ is a correlative of this poetics; and so are action painting and jazz, which poets at this time turned to because they offered the instruction they wanted. ‘There was no poetic,’ Olson said of this time. ‘It was Charlie Parker.’”<sup>34</sup> After Nancy one can think of the poem as a voice that passes from poet to reader. Poet and reader are linked as a sharing, or *partage*, rather than as author and exegete, artist and critic, or producer and consumer. It is possible to think of it as a movement of poetry from poet to poet, where poetry opens up a mode of existence in which poems appear. Stephen Fredman's idea is that projectivism is a social poetics as well as a poetics of verse. It is a poetics aimed not only at the production of works but at the formation of the group—or, more exactly, the formation of a space (an open field) in which poets and artists can come and go and in which works of art are free to take place *under any description*. The formation of such a space is what Olson achieved (or sustained) at Black Mountain College during the early 1950s.<sup>35</sup> Black Mountain College

was an art school founded in North Carolina in 1933. One of its first artists-in-residence was Josef Albers, who brought to the school an aesthetic outlook that he had acquired at the Bauhaus during the Weimar years: "Art is concerned with the HOW and not with the WHAT; not with literal content but with the performance of factual content. The performance—how it is done—that is the content of art."<sup>36</sup> Olson was the school's director during its last five years of operation. In *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, Martin Duberman gives a detailed account of Olson's transformation of the college from an art school into an art colony—indeed, a colony of performance art.<sup>37</sup> In 1952, to take a famous example, John Cage (who had been visiting the college since the early forties) staged one of his "circuses" in which ten people (poets, dancers, musicians, painters) were each assigned a time-slot of forty-five minutes (each running concurrently with the others) in which to do whatever they wished:

Spectators took their seats in the square arena forming four triangles created by diagonal aisles, each holding the white cup that had been placed on their chair. White paintings by a visiting student, Robert Rauschenberg, hung overhead. From a stepladder Cage, in a black suit and tie, read a text "on the relation of music to Zen Bhuddism" and excerpts from Meister Eckhart. Then he performed a "composition with a radio," following the pre-arranged "time brackets." At the same time Rauschenberg played old records on a hand-wound gramophone and David Tudor played a "prepared piano." Later Tudor turned to two buckets, pouring water from one to the other while, planted in the audience, Charles Olson and Mary Caroline Richards read poetry. Cunningham and others danced through the aisles chased by an excited dog, Rauschenberg flashed "abstract slides" (created by coloured gelatin sandwiched between the glass) and film clips projected onto the ceiling showed first the school cook, and then, as they gradually moved from the ceiling down the wall, the setting sun. In a corner, the composer Jay Watt played exotic musical instruments and "whistles blew, babies screamed, and coffee was served by four boys dressed in white. (PLA.82; see also BM.350–58)

It was at Black Mountain that Merce Cunningham assembled his first dance company—with a Dionysian Charles Olson, all six-foot-seven, two hundred fifty pounds of him, taking the class. (Cunning-

ham says: “it wasn’t unhappy to watch him—he was something like a light walrus” [BM.380]).<sup>38</sup> One can imagine what Bataille would have made of Olson’s companionship. Fielding Dawson recalls: “Charley was an enthusiastic teacher, and in those days optimistic, completely absorbed in his talk: the white blackboard began to fill with blue diagrams, blue words and long blue sentences, his hands turned blue and he had blue smudges on his face and mustache from smoking his cigar with his chalk hand, on he went, and once, with no place to write, he wrote towards the edge of the blackboard, wrote down the right margin, there was no right margin, but he went on, crossing over and going through already sentences until he came to the chalk tray, and bending over went clean off the blackboard to the floor, laughing with us.”<sup>39</sup> (Recall Blanchot on the interminability of *l’écriture*.)

***Désœuvrement: Worklessness.*** What conception of art, if any, attaches itself to the theory of “nonproductive expenditure”? Perhaps only the Duchampean concept of art-in-general: art freed from genre distinctions (painting, sculpture, music, verse).<sup>40</sup> Blanchot thinks that fragmentary writing is not a genre of writing but is just the thing itself, *l’écriture*, where all discursive fields are vulnerable to the *désœuvrement* of *l’écriture*—in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas defines postmodernity as, among other things, the seeping of poetry (opaque, self-reflexive language) into philosophy (of a certain stripe) and then into the problem-solving communicative praxis that defines the public sphere.<sup>41</sup> Anarchy follows. The question of nonproductive expenditure has particular relevance to the problem of the avant-garde work. The avant-garde work does not belong to the history of genius, much less the history of taste, but to the history of the anarchist group. The avant-garde work is less likely to resemble a monumental construction like Joyce’s *Ulysses* than a minimalist event like John Cage’s *4’33”*. Whereas the monumental work is classically self-sufficient (Heidegger’s ideal, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” of the originary self-standing Greek edifice, which appears to have created itself), the avant-garde work is accessible only through layers of social mediation, meaning that one has to belong to the social space in which the work appears in order to make sense of it at all (but Gadamer, as we saw in chapter 2, would say that this belonging is a condition of every aesthetic experience, ancient or modern). Moreover, belonging to such a space entails belonging to its history and therefore understanding the conditions that make the

work a possibility in the moment at hand (that not everything is possible at every moment is the motto of art history: the experience of the work demands responsiveness to historicity—Blanchot would call this the *exigency* of the avant-garde). In this respect understanding a work is more like understanding a social practice or a form of life than it is understanding a concept, proposition, or the use of criteria. This helps to explain why the avant-garde work is often not really accessible to critical spectators of a certain traditional disposition.

A clear and fruitful example of this is Michael Fried's famous reaction to the minimalist (or, as Fried prefers, "literalist") work of Donald Judd and Frank Stella during the sixties. Judd's sculptures appear to be simple indeterminate shapes without parts or design or any sign of assembly or composition; Stella's paintings are painted stripes (famously, four identical paintings of black stripes exhibited in 1959–60). Fried meanwhile is a formalist whose relation to works of art is essentially judicial. Thus the issue for Fried is how, analytically, to tell a work of art from the material of which it is made (frame, canvas, painted shapes). "What is at stake," he says, "is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects."<sup>42</sup> Fried's position is that the materiality of the work must be experienced as a medium and not simply as material; otherwise we haven't got art but simply a mere thing. The position is similar to Adorno's formalism, which insists on matter as mediation, not in order to represent or intend something but simply to set the work apart from the empirical world: "the concept of form marks out art's sharp antithesis to an empirical world in which art's right to exist is uncertain."<sup>43</sup> To be an artwork the work must exhibit "aesthetic rationality" or the exercise of conscious control over its materials (AT.58/AeT.34–35). *Exeunt* Duchamp, Cage, and the minimalists. (Adorno again: "As soon as the artwork fears for its purity so fanatically that it loses faith in its possibility and begins to display outwardly what cannot become art—canvas and mere tones—it becomes its own enemy. . . . This tendency culminates in the *happening*" [AT.158/AeT.103].) In Fried's language, by foregrounding medium the modernist work tries "to defeat or suspend its own objecthood" (AO.120). No one sees a Jackson Pollock drip-painting as reducible to its material, although as action painting the work is perhaps inseparable from the performance of its composition. But with Stella the difference between a painting and a painted canvas is no longer self-evident. One cannot tell that the thing is art simply

by looking at it (in Clement Greenberg's famous expression, one is perilously close to looking simply at a frame and canvas exhibiting a flat surface).<sup>44</sup> For Fried this means that the minimalist or literalist work is art that can no longer be experienced as art. Minimalism or literalism "aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such" (AO.120). In which case it is something other than art: an object, although perhaps not a real one! It is interesting that Fried stops short of calling the minimalist work a mere thinglike thing, although he no longer takes it as art. What is it, then? Or, as John Cage asked prophetically in a 1957 essay, "Where do we go from here?" (His answer: "Towards theater.")<sup>45</sup>

*Theater of Cruelty.* The interest of Fried's analysis is that he interprets the minimalist work as an event or performance: "the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater" (AO.125).<sup>46</sup> Fried means this as an insult but, like Plato's rejection of the poets, it is the medium of an essential insight: "theater," he says, "is now the negation of art" (which is, subtly, not the same as non-art) (AO.125). The mode of appearance of the minimalist work—its presence—"is basically a theatrical effect or quality—a kind of *stage* presence. It is a function, not just of the obtrusiveness and, often, even aggressiveness of the literalist work, but of the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder" (AO.127).<sup>47</sup> Complicity is the essential note, that is, it defines something essential about the social nature of the avant-garde work, whose "objecthood" is not that of a work that one simply beholds; rather the work is folded into an event in which one is a participant and not simply a beholder, at least not a critical observer whose job is zoning and assessment. The minimalist work occupies something close to what Deleuze and Guattari call "haptic" or nonoptical space, a space that can only be entered, not comprehended as a whole or from a perspective (MP.614–25/TP.492–99). It is an event, moreover, in which one's participation makes the work possible (as in Gadamer's theory). Possibly the work may not outlast its event, as in performance art. Theater has this transitory ontology that Artaud's "theater of cruelty" tries to isolate by separating the theater-event from any notion of work or text: in "pure theater," otherwise called the "anarchic poetry of space," there are no antecedents to performance. In other words, no dramatization—the language of theater becomes a medium of noise and physical shock; the after-effect of

theater is not catharsis but trauma.<sup>48</sup> Performance art is a strong example of nonproductive expenditure because its purse is entirely exhausted by what takes place.

Dance likewise is a good case of *désœuvrement*. A piece of choreography is a kind of body art that is extremely difficult to preserve over time: dancers grow old, the dance mistress forgets, or dies. Balanchine could never understand why people wanted him to revive his earlier achievements. There is no text for the choreography of *Swan Lake* the way there is a score for its music or a narrative for its story (dance notation is a good example of “indeterminacy of translation”). A performance can be repeated but not preserved. (A video recording of a performance is not a performance of anything but the video recording.) In an essay on “The Impermanent Art” (1955) Merce Cunningham said that his idea of dance is to perform something that is just the thing itself: for example, a jump (without musical accompaniment, but when Cunningham collaborated with his friend John Cage, not without noise). Cunningham’s choreography, following Cage, sometimes takes the form of tossing a coin to determine what shape the jump will take, and what is shaped is not only a bodily movement but the time and space in which the movement occurs, a shape that exists only for an instant and will never occur again. On other occasions Cunningham’s dancers improvise their movements. This is not artlessness: since the dancers are superbly trained, their movements cannot help being dance (as if a dancer could no longer merely move). But their movement is exhausted in the performance of it; it is what Deleuze and Guattari call a *baecceity*, a singularity like five o’clock yesterday evening.<sup>49</sup> There will be other five o’clocks but not that one. Fried says: “The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater.” “Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater” (AO.139, 141). So once more the history of art comes to an end.<sup>50</sup>

In the 1970s performance art followed minimalism by doing away with the production of objects altogether.<sup>51</sup> The idea was in part to see whether one could create an art that could not be bought or sold. This was already the goal of Dada and the (or some) Surrealists. One can think of the New York of the 1970s as a recuperation of Dada the way the New York of the fifties and sixties was a recuperation of Duchamp.<sup>52</sup> True to the spirit of the age but also to the spirit of Artaud, Bataille, and perhaps before them all, Alfred Jarry, certain performance artists probed for an absolute stopping-point, as when Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm with a pistol or when

Orlan had her face surgically removed, with the surgery being simultaneously telecast to several places around the world.<sup>53</sup> Here is an end-of-art story to end all end-of-art stories, as if art were crossing over into Bataille's underworld of mutilation, sacrifice, and suicide. In its obsession with extreme situations, performance art belongs to the history of surrealism, or at all events to Artaud's kind of theater as "an area in which there are no precise rules," except for one: "Without an element of cruelty at the foundation of every spectacle, the theater is not possible" (OC.118/AA.251). Imagine cruelty as a condition of theater (this was already the insight of the Jacobean stage—think of Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, in which someone pours hot grease on the foot of Ursula the Pig Woman). Bataille, who knew Artaud slightly, once went to hear him speak:

A few years before I had attended a lecture he gave at the Sorbonne. . . . He talked about theatrical art, and in the state of half-somnolence in which I listened I became aware that he had suddenly risen: I understood what he was saying, he had resolved to personify the state of mind of Thyestes when he realized that he had devoured his own children. Before an auditorium packed with the bourgeoisie (there were hardly any students), he grasped his stomach and let out the most inhuman sound that has ever come from a man's throat: it created the sort of disquiet that would have been felt if a dear friend had suddenly become delirious. It was awful (perhaps the more so for being only acted out. (AM.43)

*La communauté désœuvrée.* The avant-garde work emphasizes the theatricality that is arguably a condition of all art. One could put this in a slightly different way. In the avant-garde the production of the work cannot be separated from the formation of the group, and vice versa: in the case of the surrealists, for example, the group *is* the work—"Surrealism," Blanchot says, "is and has always been a collective experience" (EI.598/IC.408)—but a work in the sense of Nancy's *communauté désœuvrée* rather than on the order of Socrates' "city of words" or in Aristotle's conception of politics as an extension of the logical form of friendship (which is also the form of the proposition: friendship follows the logic of identity rather than the relation of alterity).<sup>54</sup> Benjamin in his essay on the surrealists emphasizes the primacy of ecstatic experiences over the production of works: "anyone who has perceived that the writings of this circle are not litera-

ture but something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature—will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms” (GS.2.1:297/SW.2:208). The group always has the structure (and often the historical location) of a *Bobème*: a nonproductive community that does not hang together, which does not last, and whose floating center is the performance (the exhibition, the reading, the happening, and more generally the *scene*). Its population is Baudelairean in the sense of being nomadic; it exists like a Deleuzean “war machine.”<sup>55</sup> Its distinctive modes of communication are gossip, collaboration, the quarrel, and the inevitably short-lived review. In his memoir, “*The Black Mountain Review*,” Robert Creeley recalls Ezra Pound’s advice: think of a literary review as something around which you gather people, not a box to put them in.<sup>56</sup> Its solidarity is the solidarity of theater, where theater should be understood in Artaud’s sense, in which the distance between performers and spectators narrows to zero—Artaud pictures his audience as a crowd in the street, a porous, exposed, Nietzschean audience whose ancestor is the Dionysian community: “We are eliminating the stage and the auditorium and replacing them with a kind of single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will itself become the theater of the action. A direct communication will be reestablished between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, because the spectator, by being placed in the middle of the action, is enveloped by it and caught in its crossfire” (OC.114–15/AA.248).

The “Futurist moment,” as Marjorie Perloff has shown, is a moment of theatricality whose principal form is the manifesto, “a new literary genre” designed to work like a political intervention rather than as a work of art.<sup>57</sup> The idea is to alter the artworld and not simply to find one’s place in it or merely take it over as is. Futurism (whether Italian or Russian) defines the original difference between avant-garde aesthetics in general and the formalist aesthetics of high modernism (as in Greenberg’s and Fried’s “modernism”): the artist’s task is to create a new environment and not just new objects. Indeed, the one is the condition of the other, because the avant-garde environment (the Cabaret Voltaire is the locus classicus) works like an anarchic space in which *any* innovation—indeed, anything at all—can take place. (“Do Whatever” is the rule of Duchampean modernism, according to Thierry de Duve [KD.327].) In *My Futurist Years* Roman Jakobson gives a moving and often funny account of the way

he was swept up into just such a space created by Majakovskij and Xlebnikov, whose collection of poems and manifestos, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (1912), was one of the texts that inspired Jakobson to become a linguist specializing in the study of poetic language. Of course Jakobson tried his hand at poetry and at writing manifestos, and he collaborated with Majakovskij and Xlebnikov on many projects, but the moral of his story is that one doesn't have to be an artist to belong to an artworld. The idea is to experience it—and the experience is of social transformation (inhabiting a new world): “The evenings of the Futurists brought together an amazing number of the public: the Large Hall of the Polytechnic Museum was completely packed! The public's reaction to them was various: many came for the sake of scandal, but a broad segment of the student public awaited the new art, wanted the new word (by the way—and this is interesting—they weren't particularly interested in prose. This was a time when readers . . . thought that the main thing was poetry, and that poetry had a genuinely new word to say. Apart from these large public evenings there were many closed groups, circles, and private gatherings, where the main place was allotted to the new word).”<sup>58</sup>

In his study of the poetic communities of North Beach in San Francisco, the poet Michael Davidson gives perhaps the best account we have of how deeply poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Spicer invested themselves in the formation of such communities, and how poetic subjectivities (like Davidson's own) took shape within such formations.<sup>59</sup> Imagine an aesthetics whose goal is not so much the creation of the work as the creation of a form of life that produces poets. (“An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one,” says Walter Benjamin (“The Author as Producer” [GS.2.2:696/SW.2:777]). As Michael Davidson suggests, this would be something like a utopian aesthetics or a political imaginary in which, among other things, poetry and art would no longer be required to justify themselves (before whom?) in order to exist. No apologies, no regrets. Imagine poetry as a given—freed from the Socratic exigency that lovers of poetry must come to its defense. Poetry presupposes a culture of the gift in which responsiveness and acceptance—as well as, to be sure, exposure and risk—are what make reality inhabitable. It presupposes what Nancy calls community: being together or being-in-common in which “we are not a ‘being’ but a ‘happening’” (“Finite History” [BP.157]). The poet David Antin captures something of this in one of his talk-poems, “what it means to be avant-garde”:

and i

did the best i could      under the circumstances      of being  
there then      which is my image of what an artist does and  
is      somebody who does the best he can      under the  
circumstances      without worrying about making it new or  
shocking      because the best you can do depends upon what you  
have to do and where      and if you have to invent something  
new to do the work at hand you will      but not if you have a  
ready-made that will work and is close at hand and you want  
get on with the rest of the business  
then youll pick up  
the tool thats there      a tool that somebody else has made  
that will work      and youll lean on it and feel grateful  
when its good to you      for somebody elses workand youll  
think of him as a friend who would borrow as freely from you  
if he thought of it or needed to      because there is  
a community of artists      who don't recognize copyrights and  
patents      or shouldnt      except under unusual circumstances  
who send each other tools in the mail or exchange them  
in conversation in a bar<sup>60</sup>

**Language Writing.** Much of the most memorable poetry written in North America during the past half-century has sometimes gone by the name of “language poetry,” or *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Poetry, after the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews between 1978 and 1981. Language poetry looks very much like the longest-running literary movement of the twentieth century. Its poets are flourishing thirty years after the fact. This may be in part because language poetry is not an aesthetic concept; strictly speaking it is not a concept at all but a family name of poets who trace their lineage to early modernists like Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, but also to writers like the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, whose essay “The Nature of the Word” (1922) celebrates the rich materiality of his native tongue: “The Russian language . . . in its totality is a turbulent sea of events, a continuous incarnation and activation of rational and breathing flesh. No language resists more strongly than Russian the tendency toward naming and utilitarian application. Russian nominalism, that is, the idea of the reality of the word as such, breathes life into the spirit of our language and connects it with Hellenic philological culture, not etymologically or literally, but through the principle of inner freedom” (CPL.121).<sup>61</sup> This captures very well the spirit of lan-

guage poetry, with its love of *parataxis*, *anacoluthia*, and *metonymy*—figures of speech (descendents of Hellenic philology) in which language breaks up the integrations of grammatical form. Here, as a random example, is the opening poem of Lyn Hejinian's *The Cell*:

It is the writer's object  
to supply the hollow green  
and yellow life of the  
human I  
It rains with rains supplied  
before I learned to type  
along the sides who when  
asked what we have in  
common with nature replied opportunity  
and size  
Readers of the practical help  
They then reside  
And resistance is accurate—it  
rocks and rides the momentum  
Words are emitted by the  
rocks to the eye  
Motes, parts, genders, sights collide  
There are concavities  
It is not imperfect to  
have died.<sup>62</sup>

Hejinian thinks of her poetry as “metonymic,” that is, organized according to patterns of adjacency, intervals, increments: “The metonymic world,” she says, “is unstable. While metonymy maintains the intactness and discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points. Deduction, induction, and juxtaposition are used to make connections”—but the connections never resolve themselves into a whole, so that the form of the poem is open-ended or, as Hejinian likes to say, “restless.”<sup>63</sup> However, putting questions of open form to one side, language poetry is less a formal enterprise than a number of large, diverse, and fluid interactions among poets centered in San Francisco and New York but also embracing Canada and Great Britain, with filiations extending into Eastern Europe and Australia (and translations into, among other languages, Chinese.) Like the surrealists the language poets share practices rather than theories. What makes them a group is their involvement with one another in a variety of activities from poetry readings to literary criticism to publication in a surprising number of

journals, anthologies, websites, and thoroughly noncommercial books of poetry published by an array of small presses (Figures, ROOF, Sun and Moon). Individually they do very different things, but they do so within the framework of social relationships highlighted above all by the poetry reading.<sup>64</sup> Charles Bernstein writes:

Readings are the central social activity of poetry. They rival publishing as the most significant method of distribution of poetic works. They are as important as books and magazines in bringing poets into contact with one another, in forming generational and cross-generational, cultural and cross-cultural, links, affinities, alliances, scenes, networks, exchanges, and the like. . . . The reading is the site in which the audience of poetry constitutes and reconstitutes itself. It makes itself visible to itself. And while most attention has been paid to those moments when the poetry reading has been a means to cross over to a wider audience . . . the fundamental significance of the reading, it seems to me, has to do with infrastructure not spectacle. For this reason I would turn around the familiar criticism that everyone at a poetry reading is a poet to say that this is just what is vital about a reading series, even the essence of a poetry reading. For poetry is constituted dialogically through recognition and exchange with an audience of peers, where the poet is not performing to invisible readers or listeners but actively exchanging work with other performers and participants. . . . The poetry reading is an ongoing convention of poetry, by poetry, for poetry.<sup>65</sup>

Bob Perelman writes: “The performance pieces and talks on poetics that took place frequently during the initial stages of the formation of the language group were communal events, casual, intense interactions that took place in lofts and art spaces. But they were not only addressed to immediate participants: they were also recorded. However contingent and trivial some of the remarks were, those tapes were aimed at entering and redefining literary history.”<sup>66</sup> One could also say they were aimed at *appropriating* literary modernism, as if to keep it from coming to an end. Hence their commitment to conceptual innovations in poetics and to formal experimentation as a way of keeping the question of what counts as poetry unsettled and controversial. They understand themselves as belonging to (*and essentially responsible for*) a specific tradition made up of Stein, Ezra Pound, Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky, Jackson MacLow, the Black

Mountain Poets, Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, as well as the avant-garde groups that San Francisco and New York continue to make possible. If there is a shared idea, it is that poetry is not simply another species of discourse, a particular way of using language that can be contrasted with other discursive genres (philosophy, for example); rather, poetry is an exploration and experience of language in all of its formal, material, and semantic dimensions, including its historical conditions of existence within an array of social and cultural contexts. As Hejinian says in connection with Gertrude Stein, “language is an order of reality itself and not a mere mediating medium,” so that one can have a confrontation with a word or phrase that is as significant as one’s confrontation with things of the world (LI.90).

*The Heteroclitite Entity.* The preceding helps explain the concentration among language poets upon the idea of poetry as an event as well as a construction, where the emphasis falls, among other places, on how a poem (or how language) makes its appearance.<sup>67</sup> We can think of this emphasis as a modification of the modernist thesis that a poem is made of words but is not a use of them. This is not just an intensification of the thesis but (as in Blanchot’s poetics of *désœuvrement*) a bending of it away from the idea of a poem as something made (an artifact). Thus, as we have seen in Gadamer’s aesthetics, a performance of the work is not something added to something made; it is the singular thing itself. This is because the temporality of the poem is not of something present but of something that interrupts the present by taking shape there. In one of his talk-poem “durations,” David Antin (not one of the language poets but an enormous influence on them) calls attention to the two modes of existence of his “work”:

as a performer im an improviser so i dont know  
 exactly what im going to say when i begin though ive  
 thought about talking of particular things and when ive  
 finished talking i may still be interested in something ive  
 said and i may want to think about it again and sometimes  
 i’ll want to look at it and transcribe it and maybe even  
 publish it in a more or less extensive form that hangs  
 pretty close to the original talk or the sense of it  
 even when ive extended it because im much less  
 interested in revision and polishing than in the difference  
 between print and performance  
 (wim.65)

The difference between performance and print is, for Antin, analogous to the difference between poetry and works (that is, objects) of art: “most people / in art schools are interested in making objects” — that is, “objects of duration.” Such objects don’t interest Antin. To say why they don’t he recalls a visit of his to the Louvre in which he hunts up mainly the paintings of low-profile artists while trying very hard (but failing) to avoid the Mona Lisa tour. On his way out he passes one of Rembrandt’s self-portraits:

as i passed the rembrandts on the way out i  
stopped for a moment to look once again at the self portrait  
with the palette in his hand and the turban tied around his  
head which looks more like a painters cloth to protect his  
hair and an expression that suggests some kind of comment  
on the object of painting its meaning and perhaps its duration  
a comment that looks to me like the beginning of a very  
rueful jewish grin that expresses something of my own  
disdain for the idea of duration

(wim.72)

What are “objects of duration”? They are evidently not just things that don’t get thrown away — unlike Duchamp’s Readymades, which we know of chiefly from photographs or replicas; they are cultural icons like the Mona Lisa, and also of course like Rembrandt’s self-portraits. But the Rembrandt that catches Antin’s attention is a self-interrupting icon (like the one in John Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*). As a self-portrait it incorporates — one could say, perpetually interrupts — the performance of its composition. The expression on Rembrandt’s face is a moment of *désœuvrement* — unworking — inserted into the work, an *entretemps*. Naturally one thinks about whether the same is true of the Mona Lisa’s smile. We underestimate the difficulty of such smiles with respect to aesthetic experience as a distinterested event. At any rate Antin reads Rembrandt’s face as a “rueful jewish grin that expresses something of my own / disdain for the idea of duration.”

I want to say that this disdain of duration expresses the fundamental anarchism (one could call it the antiprinciple principle: the *désœuvrement*) of Antin’s poetics (and of the avant-garde, of performance art, and of language poetry). The idea is to produce an event in which the work takes place without taking final form; it materializes without becoming objectified or even finished. The poem in this respect is a singularity, a *haecceity* that can be communicated through a *par-*

*tage* of voices but which can no longer be identified on its own as a thing set apart from the community that assembles in its company. John Cage remarked on the ability of Robert Rauschenberg's paintings to escape the fixity of painting despite being made of paint, not to mention canvases stretched on a frame and hung on a wall, for all the world objects of art: "Over and over again I've found it impossible to memorize Rauschenberg's paintings. I keep asking, 'Have you changed it?' And then noticing while I'm looking that it changes. I look out the window and see the icicles. There dripping water is frozen into an object. The icicles all go down. Winter more than the others is the season of quiescence."<sup>68</sup> What's the principle here? In "'45' for a Speaker," Cage explains it as follows:

10"

The principle called mobility-immobility is this:  
 every thing is changing  
 but while some things  
 are changing  
 others are not.

20"

eventually those  
 that were  
 not

30"

changing  
 begin suddenly  
 to change (S.154)

The principle (mobility-immobility: *désœuvrement*) is that the work of art belongs to an unstable environment (historicity is internal to its essence); it cannot be sealed off from this environment because it is, whatever else it is, an event that happens simultaneously with everything else taking place in the ongoing places it traverses and which, indeed, it works to form. (Recall Celan's figure of the poem: *Unterwegssein* ["Der Meridian," GWC.3:186/CP.34].) There are no unaccompanied works of art. Poets and audiences of poetry are clandestine companions of poems that travel from one environment to another. To be sure, we are trained in school to transform works of art into aesthetic phenomena by bracketing them — Gadamer calls this "aesthetic differentiation" (WM.81/TM.85). But the poem cannot be differentiated as a one-time thing that gets picked up now and again by the isolated reader. On the contrary, as Peter Middleton suggests in "The Contemporary Poetry Reading," the concept of the poem needs

to be radically socialized: “Instead of thinking of the poem as something that moves around being variously interpreted, read aloud, published in different forms, and generally provoking distinct interpretations, we might be better to think of it all as a large heteroclite entity, that mixes texts, people, performances, memories, and other possible affinities, in a process that engages many people, perhaps only briefly, over a long period of time, whose outcomes are usually hard to see, and which has no clear boundaries, not the page, the reading, the critical study” (CL.294).

***Community without Myth.*** Thierry de Duve regards modernism as a utopian project that failed (KD.191). A hundred years of in-your-face rhetoric has (he thinks) left modernity—the alienated, rationalized world of industrial-technological capitalism—unchanged. (This is a universal disappointment at the end of the century: art, like politics, is unredemptive.) Says de Duve: the artworld, especially in New York, is thoroughly commercialized—a market institution if there ever was one—and painters mostly work alone (KD.191–92). As a self-professed “man of ’68” (KD.288), de Duve longs for community (KD.462). But probably not a poetic community, since such a community does not fit anywhere along the axis between libertarian-communitarian or liberal-socialist categories. The poem as a “heteroclite entity” is anarchic on the model of *partage*: as a formal object the poem is always in excess of itself—ecstatic, journeying outside itself and absorbing its surroundings into itself as it goes. Why not think of this as the historical mode of existence of the poem, whose self-identity is not a logical *ipseity* but entails the multiple communities that it generates through those whom it fascinates? Nancy points out that literature is not myth—on a certain romantic, functionalist, nationalist notion of myth as a unitary narrative that gathers a whole people into a totality. Whereas myth (in this certainly erroneous sense) produces communion—heterogeneous people united as in one voice—literature is serial in its production, a sharing or division of voices. Its unity is not organic, that is, as Nancy puts it, it is “articulated” rather than “organized,” where “articulation is only a juncture, or more exactly the play of a juncture: what takes place where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other—exactly at its limit—where these singular and distinct pieces fold or stiffen, flex or tense themselves together and through one another, unto one another, without this mutual *play*—which always re-

mains, at the same time, a play *between* them—ever forming into the substance of a higher power of a Whole” (CD.188/IC.76). So one could say that, unlike romantic myth (or ideology, law, or philosophical rationality), what poetry produces is not a totality or a unitary community but a nomadic series of associations whose sociality, if I have it right, is theatrical and performative in the sense that it comes together and disperses, increases or depletes itself, and never settles into place. Its form is as open as the form of its poetry.