

# W I T Z

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**Peter Quartermain on  
Bruce Andrews's *Lip Service***

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**Juliana Spahr on  
Nick Piombino's *Light Street***

*"What interests me about Piombino's work is his emphasis on how language can heal, rather than on how our world is fractured. I read his work as a primer that says here we are post-Saussure, post-Vietnam, now how do we keep from going crazy..."*

**Guy Bennett on Liz Waldner**

**Standard Schaefer on Martha Ronk**

**Brian Lucas on Norma Cole**

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EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER REINER

# Paradise as Praxis: A Preliminary Note on Bruce Andrews's *Lip Service*

by Peter Quartermain

*"She had once accused [her husband, Guy Pringle,] of considering her feelings less than those of anyone else with whom they came into contact. Surprised, he had said: 'But you are myself. I don't need to consider your feelings.'"*

Olivia Manning

*"If there is to be a 'we,' it is not one tyrannized into supposed consensus but one founded on interaction."*

Robert Sheppard<sup>0</sup>

**I**N WHAT FOLLOWS I draw quite extensively on two essays by Bruce Andrews: the title essay of *Paradise & Method*, in which he discusses the compositional principles and procedures of *Lip Service*, which is a nearly 400 page poem, and his major but largely neglected essay on sexuality in writing, "Be Careful Now You Know Sugar Melts In Water," first published in *Temblor* in 1987.<sup>1</sup> *Lip Service* is a line-by-line re-working and "near-translation" of Dante's *Paradiso*. A number of readers have found especially the early sections of the poem to be extremely offensive, and it is certainly true that the experience of reading Andrews's poem is remarkably unlike the experience of reading

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Dante's. The following brief extract, from the seventh part of the fourth section, "Venus," reworks part of Dante's ninth canto.

To get more joy out of sex, specify male or female –  
keep away from clothes, air-brush your vanity  
obstinately persistent & oblivious to circumstances,  
oooh oooh oooh, besame mucho  
delay pride's quake enhances  
pubic esplanade.

Explosive smudge that silk  
overthrows straight seeking empties with stamina  
I yet squander – foresworn careful, sabateurishly culling  
a sexual diversion for the noontime meal  
but then he said my vagina was too big, taking coke with freon.

Ovum aura sordid chaise – I like disturbed  
don't hatch married women are always martyrs in a hurry:  
I don't feel selfish about this, this is  
something coming together between us—  
exasperating deporting eroticism as decision;  
I took a shit in the bed... dream abruptly ends.

Oh spring attacking cushion reference rest –  
poutless ardor, winter iron spoiler  
barb buy warmth on margin  
preferring the mud to the fist, become nobody  
lye sent us, sully refrigeration open to her  
then, her – bones her repeat the frost  
superb! – (TS 125)

All those voices, with the uncertain and shifting phrasal boundaries, the disjointed syntax. And the wit, the humour, the puns. These are all highly problematic: why do we laugh (if we do), and what at, exactly? The uncertainties of phrasal boundaries profoundly disorient the reader

– and what of the pronouns? The “you” and the “I” encountered so often in this poem are who? the self? men? women? Can we differentiate with any certainty?

George Oppen once said that “the ‘plain sense’ of the poem is the paradise of meaning.”<sup>2</sup> But his remark leaves open, of course, the question what exactly “plain sense” might be. What, especially, might the “plain sense” of this poem be, and – and which is much more to my purpose here – what is the connection between this poem, in its hellish vision of a world in which the word “love” scarcely appears at all<sup>3</sup> and in which *no-one* is beloved, and Paradise, specifically Dante’s *Paradiso*? *Lip Service* is an extremely problematical text. Not least among the problems is that of intelligibility – “plain sense”; closely connected to it is the problem of voice. Overall, like the work collected in *Give Em Enough Rope* (1987) and *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)* (1992), there is a truculent in-your-face quality to *Lip Service*, which draws on many voices to sound its disposition. The poem *contests* the protocols of readership.

If *Lip Service* is, like Dante’s *Paradiso*, a portrayal of the Beloved, then that portrayal of the Beloved is pretty horrific. One reason why the *Paradiso* informs and models this text is because – in Andrews’ words – his own poem seeks to map and contest “*sense* in a particular present (of ‘late capitalism’) where sexuality figures so prominently in a near-totalizing machine of social discourse” (“Be Careful” 125), and his own poem “reverberates with the romance and utopia-saturated materials” (“Paradise” 251) of Dante’s poem. The portrayal of the Beloved in *Lip Service* runs savagely counter to the myth of women and sexuality purveyed in the market place and the entertainment industry (to say nothing of the *Paradiso*), yet at the same time it clearly reflects it: by and large, women in this poem – and especially in the first five sections – are, like women in advertisements, unreflective and largely uncritical creatures whose major interests and passions revolve around cosmetics, breast implants, sexual performance and social standing; vain, manipulative, inconstant, they seem by and large to participate more or less willingly in a life which is, by any standards, undesirable and indeed dehumanised – as the poem proceeds, its title comes among

other things to suggest joyless oral sex. This paradise is a Hell in which women are more or less willingly complicit in their own damnation. It is a world of “hot narcissism” (TS 121) in which “falsies exult” (TS 124); it is a world of “mimetic emptiness” (TS 70) in which women are as scornful of their own bodies as they are callous towards the men they exploit but are dependent on, whom they despise and contemn. The explicit sexual language, the events referred to (“I took a shit in the bed”) are horrible.

So horrible, in fact, that we tend to overlook other aspects of this text. If we read the predominant voice in the poem as female, then we are obliged to recognise three things. First, that many of these utterances suggest the extent to which the speaker is caught up in a system not of her own devising, and is in fact as much a victim as an exploiter of the system. Second, that on occasion the speaker is remarkably self-aware of her condition and position, and sees no escape from it save through sardonic and grimly comic, often sexually suggestive or even explicit, expression: “I traded my brain / for legwarmers”(TS 58); “I find that having a personal life / just keeps me home more” (TS 95); “nice guys are finished first” (TS 104) – these women have intelligence and wit: “think me ostensible, I need a good social personality / because I don’t have any ideas?” (TS 58); “If I’d been a ranch – which is often / – they’d have named me Bar Nothing” (TS 124). This is very much the language of satire: “I traded my looks for my health – bad bargain” (TS 60); “M[en] use intimacy to get sex; W[omen] use sex to get intimacy” (TS 136). And third, that quite often the voice is not necessarily female: on occasion it is male, quite often it is indeed completely indeterminate. Who is it that says “today Joan of Arc would get thorazine” (TS 60), “what you call reflection / I call constipation” (TS 54), or “‘there are no rules’ means ‘women get hurt bad’” (TS 86)? Sometimes the speaker might well be an authorial third-person omniscient and genderless narrator commenting ironically on what we’ve just read, or simply giving us, in neutral voice, the “facts.” Who, after all, tells us that “the most popular in all cosmetic surgery is breast-size increase” (TS 92), or reflects that “poverty becomes more and more a women’s issue” (TS 104)? Overall, the world portrayed in this version of Dante’s *Paradiso* is joylessly bereft of the personal, and the poem is

astonishingly difficult to take, except in short doses, because it is almost unrelievedly so very disturbing. Indeed, Andrews himself has said “*I’m* upset by that material. That material makes *me* very nervous, it’s very unsettling because it’s about this social machinery which is horrifying. . . I have a horrific response to what I write, myself.”<sup>4</sup> It is a vision and version of Hell, and it is not exclusively gendered female – as the poem proceeds we discern that men too are trapped in and victims of this world they seem to have made; they are, perhaps, their own creatures. As Robin Blaser reminded us in his poem on Dante, “Hell,” said Ezra Pound, “is *here*.” How, then, can we glimpse Paradise? That is the task of the poem.

Drawing on materials he began generating in 1986, and written from 1989 to 1992, *Lip Service* is divided into what Andrews calls ten “planets” corresponding to the ten “bodies” of the *Paradiso*, and each is divided into ten parts: Earth, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Fixed Stars, and Primum Mobile. The complete poem is in two large sections, the five “planets” of Part One corresponding with Dante’s cantos 1-13, and the five of Part Two – “a little less critical & more optimistic” than Part One (“Paradise” 252)– corresponding with cantos 14-33. In “Paradise and Method” (252-4) Andrews maintains that he is using “thematic cues” from Dante as well as “resonances” between his own materials, topics, imagery, and sound-patterns and those found in Singleton’s edition of Dante,<sup>5</sup> including “cognates or so-called ‘false-friend’ relations with the Italian,” as well as punctuation and paragraphing based “strictly on Dante’s punctuation & tercet structure,” but I have not correlated Andrews’s text with Dante’s at all, and do not discuss it here. In “Paradise and Method,” written when he was about two-thirds of the way through writing *Lip Service*, Andrews outlines the great intricacy of its structure. In writing the poem he superimposed the detailed thematic outline of *Tips for Totalizers*, a projected book on poetics, not only onto the overall organization of the complete work, but also in “increasingly detailed” form onto the “internal organization” of each of its one-hundred parts, “sometimes” using the three-part breakdown of that poetics project “even to organize a fifty- or one-hundred word paragraph.” The intricacy, that is to

say, echoes something of the intricacy of Dante's poem, and provided him with a set of technical difficulties to work with and against.

The materials for the poem, and the compositional procedures, are another source of the poem's great and even manic energy. For several years Andrews has generated materials for his poetry by recording phrases, words, and scraps of sentences, usually though not always fragmentary samples of speech and discourse, on small cards, 1 to 20 words each. They might be what he overhears on the street or in the bus, on radio or television; they might be what he reads, in academic journals, government publications, billboards, newspapers. He files these (in chronological order) at the end of every day, and when he started the preliminary work on *Lip Service*, he sorted the thousands of cards he'd gathered during 1986, 1987, and 1988 into some sort of thematic coherence. What is worth noting here is that all these words are public utterance, overheard or read: *none* of these words or phrases is Andrews's own. Sorting them as he is up to three years after they were recorded, they have each of them lost their original context, and come from a now unidentifiable source and voice. It is very much to Andrews's purpose that voice — the origin of any given word or phrase if you like — be uncertain and multiple and hence unstable: it's almost impossible, reading *Lip Service*, to decide where any given voice comes from, who might be speaking. Gender blurs. It is equally to Andrews's purpose that these are all extracts from *utterance*, and discourse in the public rather than the private or personal domain — this is *public speech*, public language, at varying removes from the personal. It is worth reminding ourselves here that our identity, our sense of who we are, our sense especially but not only of gender, comes very largely from the language in which we live and by which we are surrounded: we do not easily *choose* how to behave as men and as women: we are defined by the institutions and practices that govern our social and linguistic lives. As Andrews was sorting his cards, one theme he was pursuing was what he calls "Existential action — issues about mediation & subjectivity and relations" ("Paradise" 251) — the major thematic focus, that is to say, of *Lip Service*.

Reading the poem is a bit like listening in on the powder-room of a somewhat sleazy night club in the down-market end of town on a big

night out, the sort of conversation, peppered with smutty jokes, obscenity, and scorn for human tenderness and individuality, with boastfulness and derision about sexual performance and the human body, more traditionally or conventionally associated with men in country-club locker rooms than with woman as customarily viewed in public discourse, as sexual object or as Beloved. The language of the poem reads like a detritus of social, political, and commercial language in a world of “hype” (TS 52). Trade names abound (Kotex, Breck, Lanvin, Camay, Hallmark), as do phrases from government publications, earnest sociological reports, newspaper advertisements, hard rock, rap records, book reviews, political economy, and above all personal conversation in a world suspicious of the personal and vulnerable, suspicious of feeling and passion. It is composed of what Barrett Watten fittingly calls a “semiotic rubble,”<sup>6</sup> salvaged from one sign-system after another, which suggests two things: first, that whatever desires these speakers might be giving voice to in this world of consumer gluttony, appetite, disappointment, multimedia confusion, and (that remarkably astonishing word) cupidity, those desires are not their own, but originate in a series of manipulations – the social fabrication of a desire which the Self rejects – all too often, in this text, the sexual stimulation of the body to produce unwelcome desire. This is a world which, in creating unwanted desires, thwarts them in what Charles Bernstein has called “the congealed / syntax of forced instrumentation.”<sup>7</sup> Thwarting and frustrating interior life, then, and undermining – or at least rescripting – one’s sense of one’s own identity by at the very least blurring the distinction between inner and outer, personal and public, individual and social volition.

At the same time, this semiotic rubble (and this is my second point) is in a highly disrupted, discontinuous, and even incoherent (yet still offensive) language and syntax. Nothing in this text, if we take it item by item, phrase by phrase, line by line, is stable, yet overall it is thematically clear and horrific: an upside-down world where vanity and self-regard are ever-fixed, and love is flimsy in its caprice: an inversion of the mutable and immutable. Venus (or whatever) the poem may be, but nevertheless sublunary throughout. The mixing of vocabularies and discourses is extreme, and the unassignability of voice, moment to

moment, unsettle the understanding as the pronouns shift.

How do we make sense, and what sort, of lines like “Oh spring attacking cushion reference rest —” (TS 125) or the radical shift of voice with the two words “*it* burns” in the sequence “a burning phallus for modern times, / pronoun burns — *it* burns — faithless freshness” (TS 124). Those shifts, those difficulties, undermine what stability the text might seem to possess, demolish and dissipate any sense we might have of unity of voice, and as a consequence work to disperse any concept we might have of coherent and stable individual human identity. Because the poem so often implicitly invites the reader to put together a paraphraseable meaning (what we might think of as “plain sense”) — for there are clear islands of lucidity, of clarity, in this text — the poem forces the reader both to construct possible meanings and to see how that construction itself is determined by larger social and historical forces outside the reader’s control, as much as it is by one’s own psychic volition.

The aim of the poem is to enable its readers to become, as Andrews has suggested, “less of an exile in our own words — the words we read by writing” (“Poetry as Praxis” 58) by undoing the language of control, the language of use and ideological manipulation, the language of definition and of promise. The first task of the poem is to undo the power of the sign which promises liberation and play but actually enthralls and limits; to undo the boundaries of legitimized content and consent.

Hence the poem reveals the essential inaccuracy, meaninglessness, arbitrariness and profound irrelevance of the sign, of the institutionalized cliché, of the word, of public and private language, of advertising, of government, of conduct, the language which defines and indeed appropriates desire by laying out an illusion of presence in a world which prizes use above felicity. The poem, with its blockages, its non-sequiturs, its very turbulence of sound and syntax matched by the horrific self-contradictions and denials its propositions make, is itself felicitous. The uneasy pleasure it affords demonstrates, as no expository writing could, how the users of this language are also its victims.

So the first task of the poem is to undo the sign, to address how reference works in language. The second task of the poem is to ad

dress the larger context of language: how meaning arises in a social context, in the whole framework of a discourse whose assumptions are so pervasively distributed throughout our culture that we cannot easily identify them or escape from them, so deeply embedded that they are the blind spot of our vision. If Andrews's theme is that late capitalism so constructs women – and indeed men – in public as well as private discourse, then it is essential to his project that the language in the poem be not his own, but *found*, and that the poem undermine, indeed, through demonstration, any delusion we might have that our words are, in this particular moment of history, our own. If Andrews's project is to succeed, then the complete undermining of language and discourse effected by the poem will lead to the reader's rediscovery of meaning through the construction of a meaning or rather series of meanings which can then, indeed, lead to a re-inhabitation of language, a realm or discourse in which we can dwell, and find and found our lives. "Paradise," Andrews has said, is "a total repertoire of possibilities" ("Paradise" 268). So is language, when we live *in* it. The aim of the poem is to make such a repertoire available. *A total repertoire*: "Paradise," which is also "Infinity" ("Paradise" 259), is outside the confines of any tight system, and the poem, by laying bare the device, seeks to undo an established order which "in sewing itself up into permanent stability sews us and our meanings up inside it" ("Poetry as Praxis" 58). *Lip Service*, then, is a Utopian project, in which reading is a form of writing, in which the difficult practice of reading, of choosing among an increasing plethora of possible meanings and holding them all at once, is a praxis of Paradise. There is no suggestion – in Dante or in Andrews – that Paradise is an easy place or condition, either to reach or to maintain.

Andrews is not the only so-called Language Poet to draw on and re-work Dante in a quest for a poetic mode which will bring to an end our exiled condition in language, bring readers home again: one section of Ron Silliman's long serial project *The Alphabet*, for example, is called *Paradise*; Lyn Hejinian has in her critical writing come back again and again to the nature and possibility of achieving paradise

through and in writing, language; one finds it a recurrent theme in the work of Susan Howe and Rosmarie Waldrop. It may very well be that such interrogations of Paradise derive, in their more or less immediate ancestry, from Ezra Pound's famous conclusion in *The Cantos*, "*le paradis n'est pas artificiel.*" Pound was pointing, first, to the futility of believing that we have any life other than this one, and second to the actual possibility of the individual achieving, however momentarily, a sense of paradise. Moments of coherence are unstable and transitory, but they are in Pound's view nevertheless paradisaical and actual; if they manifest the transcendent, that transcendence is secular and earth-bound.

More recent writers have emphasized that the achievement of Paradise, however fleeting, is also *linguistic*. What is important to realize about the Language Poets in this narrative is that in their investigation of Paradise and its possibility of potentiality, they are deeply suspicious of those moments of coherence, and it is very much a part of Andrews' project in *Lip Service* to *undo*, to destabilize, the authority and unity of signs, to undo any security there might be in the referentiality of words. It is a part of his project, that is to say, to negate the "plain sense" of the poem, to undo George Oppen's "paradise of meaning." Hence the extreme problematics of the poem.

For Andrews such problematics are inextricable from the problem of Love, and of the nature and identity of the Beloved. Love, after all, impels speech and is a making possible, which is why Guy Pringle's words quoted as epigraph to this essay are so monstrous. Love cannot freeze the multiple subjectivity of the Other into uniformity and stasis. The identity of the Beloved – though inevitably perceived through and thus structured by the Lover's own eyes and desire – must be always autonomous, independent, Other. And inevitably it will be concealed if not withheld, so that the Lover and the Beloved may live in what Andrews calls an "erotic mutuality of self and other" ("Be Careful" 125), recognizing a You, the Outside of *this* experience.

If love is a *making possible*, that is to say, then it resists definition and *refuses* possession: the Beloved is always a YOU, a not-me, and it is multiplex. By the same token the world is equally a "you" – that is to say, a not-me or a not-us – for it has its own ardours and desires, its

own possibilities struggling for recognition. The Beloved extends beyond the individual, and is an extension of the individual, an extension of the personal, and takes a multiplicity of forms. The Beloved is Language, Language is the Beloved; the word; words; always beyond the writer's and reader's control, always skirting and pressing the edge of the writer's desire. Language, the realm of possibles; "a total repertoire of possibilities." Paradise, and the language of the poem. Hence the poem's apparent *incoherence*: for the writer Andrews must not control the *reader* Andrews, nor by that token any other reader. The reader, like the language, is the Beloved, and therefore *MUST* remain "an Other, an Outside which is a not-us" ("Paradise" 251), autonomous, independent, Other.<sup>8</sup> The reader, too, then, takes part in, shares, this "erotic mutuality of self and other."

For things to be otherwise – for the poem to be an exercise in "communication" where the reader comes to share the thoughts and experiences, the desires and needs and conclusions, of the writer – for the poem to be, shall we say, wholly intelligible, is to engage another sort of Utopianism altogether, the dream of tyranny. The poem which seeks to persuade the reader, to hand over a "meaning" in the sense of a paraphrasable digest which can be separated out, cashed in at the end of the reading in exchange for the knowledge-claim that "this is what the poem means," is a closure of the possible, an imprisoning of desire in the interests of achieving "perfect communication." It assumes that we all come to see exactly the same things in exactly the same ways, that we assume an identity and uniformity of "reality" and "perception." The aim of such communication is to eliminate difference and to standardize desire, to catch us all up in the same web of pre-existent established order. Such communication is, indeed, the closure and elimination of desire by construing identity in terms of an achieved and uniform meaning: a form of possession in which the Beloved – Language, the Reader – is absorbed into, bound into, the Lover – the writer. In such a case we see the Disappearance of the Beloved, and the Disappearance of the Reader, who becomes a chimerical fantasy, inaccessible in her or his own identity/reality; destroyed. Or all too delusorily accessible as the Lover's Mirror. "*Language*," Philippe Sollers astutely observes, "*turns upon and possesses he who*

*believed he possessed it but in fact was only one of its signs.”<sup>9</sup>*

*Lip Service* is thus an attack on so-called “romantic” love, that alluring and seductive face of brutal sexism, because “romantic” love seeks to destroy the Beloved by Possession: the reader shall be subject to the writer, the subject obedient to the Author, the material of the poem utterly subservient to its Creator and User. Hence Andrews’ poem is indeed what at the Kootenay School of Writing he called a “mad-dog attack” on antifeminist practice, upon institutionalized notions of the feminine, upon institutions. It undoes Romance. And if, then, women in the poem seem dehumanized, then the poem assaults too the notions of “human” and “humanized” which lie behind that, and which produced their “dehumanized” “nature” in the first place. The poem thus shifts the ground of meaning from what perhaps can best be called a series of cultural imperatives to the very act of reading itself. Value is thus shifted from artifact to process: the voices, the play in and of language, the dialogue with the poem taking place in the reader’s consciousness, all moving toward some sort of cognition and recognition of meaning which cannot be separated from the decisions made within the writing/reading.

“Paradise,” says Andrews, “is translated as Love and as Language” (“Paradise” 258). Language, “an Other or an Outside which is both a not-us and a not-yet” (“Paradise” 259); language as a complex and difficult ongoing activity (a PRAXIS), most readily to be identified as “a total repertoire of possibilities”: that which is to be realized, that is to say, only as a plural of potentialities, a promise or rather promises which can never come to completion or fulfilment but shift, change, illuminate, suffuse. Paradise, then, is the experience of potential, a perpetual opening up of perhaps ineluctible possibilities, fostering and furthering. It is a making possible, and the Language of Paradise – the language of the poem – is by necessity *incoherent*. Paradise is, in this view of things, a rage for *disorder*, though a disorder of a very specific kind. Hell may be *here*, but so too may, in its difficulties, be Paradise. The essential problem of Paradise is a problem of method. Whether *Lip Service*, with its tortured and torturing difficulties, succeeds in its aims is after all necessarily up to the reader, for the task of the poem has been regrounded, outside the poet.

- <sup>0</sup> Olivia Manning. *Friends and Heroes*, in *The Balkan Trilogy* (London: Mandarin, 1990), 765; Robert Sheppard, "British Poetry and Its Discontents." *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s*. Ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed (London: Routledge, 1992), 170.
- <sup>1</sup> Not all of *Lip Service* has been published, and I am grateful to Bruce Andrews for providing me with a copy of the complete typescript. I document all references to this poem as "TS" followed by a typescript page number. *Paradise & Method: Poetics and Praxis* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1996); "Be Careful Now You Know Sugar Melts in Water" is on pp. 125-133; "Paradise & Method: A Transcript" on 251-270. Later in this essay I refer to Andrews's "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis," which is on 49-71. All further references to these essays are documented parenthetically in my text by short title.
- <sup>2</sup> George Oppen. "The Philosophy of the Astonished (Selections from Working Papers)." Ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis. *Sulfur* 27 (Fall 1990): 212.
- <sup>3</sup> "Love" first makes its appearance in the eighth part of the second section, "Moon," reworking a section of *Paradiso* Canto 5: "no sapphire can make of your love a seductress" (TS 54), while the opening of the third section, "Mercury" (*Paradiso* Canto 6), talks of "love's winterization" (TS 71).
- <sup>4</sup> Bruce Andrews. Talk and discussion at the Kootenay School of Writing, Vancouver, 18 May 1990. My thanks to the Kootenay School of Writing for the loan of a tape-recording of this event.
- <sup>5</sup> Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy*. Translated, with a commentary, by Charles S. Singleton. Bollingen Series LXXX. 6 volumes. Princeton UP, 1970-1975.
- <sup>6</sup> Barrett Watten, "The World in the Work: Toward a Psychology of Form," *Total Syntax* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 159-160.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Bernstein, "Part Quake," *Islets / Irritations* (New York: Jordan Davies, 1983) 99.

- <sup>8</sup> This does not necessarily, of course, imply “separation.” At the Kootenay School of Writing in 1990 Andrews talked of the drive in his writing to investigate “the seducing aspects of identity creation, stemming from quite pervasive social conditions” and spoke of “trying to lay out some way of mapping, of implicating, the social conditions which are constitutive of identity across the board.”
- <sup>9</sup> Philippe Sollers. *Writing and the Experience of Limits*. Ed. David Hayman. Trans. Philip Barnard with David Hayman (New York: Columbia UP, 1983), 33 [italics in the original]. I am grateful to Robin Blaser for this reference.

# What's Worth Remembering

*Light Street* by Nick Piombino  
(Zasterle, 1998)

Reviewed by Juliana Spahr

IT HAS BEEN around so long as to be cliché: language poetry arrived fully formed out of the head of Saussurian linguistics and the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. Thus language poetry is fractured, words are splintered, phrases float without the support of sentences. Or there is another story, one told often by Ron Silliman, where the Vietnam War exposes the oppressive powers of standard English and thus in response writers with political integrity split and fracture their words. These are stories of language writing's dissolute moments, its brokenness. But like all stories of literary creation, these are partially true and partially false. And one of the things we need to do right now is to test these stories so as to get at the limits and expanses of language writing. In this direction, the work of Nick Piombino has always interested me. Piombino is socially part of the language scene: he has published in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*; he has books out on traditional language oriented presses (Sun & Moon, Roof).

And now there is his new book, *Light Street*. It is available from Zasterle (the Canary Island branch of the language school). But what interests me about Piombino's work is his emphasis on how language can heal, rather than on how our world is fractured. I

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read his work as a primer that says here we are post-Saussure, post-Vietnam, now how do we keep from going crazy.

*Light Street* can easily be read as an extension of Piombino's earlier concerns. This book is a series of shorter poems and one extended meditation ("The Gentle Instructor" which is accompanied by illustrations by Toni Simon) on the world and individual's relation to it. The narrative presence in this book helps its readers sort the difficult confusion of the world, helps readers realize "what's worth retaining / Of what remains, in spite of constant turning" (7).

Piombino is a psychoanalyst in addition to being a poet and an essay writer. It is hard for me not to read this into his work (even though I spent all last week on the autobiographical fallacy with my poetry students). Partially this is because his essays in *The Boundary of Blur* have been so explicit about this project. In *The Boundary of Blur*, the essays are difficult in their attention to and acceptance of the processes and divergences of thinking. They are almost zen-like in this pursuit. Piombino states: "I accept comparison and laughter, love and diatribe, doubt and fecundity as my daily diet. I can't reject the bitter taste of disappointment either. To avoid this compulsively may mean paralysis" (88).

This seems to me very different than much talk about life in work by Charles Bernstein or Bruce Andrews, to name some of Piombino's social compatriots. Similar to the essays, the poems in *Light Street* school how to avoid paralysis and also reflect an attention to those odd things Piombino likes to join together such as comparison and laughter: "Living is heavy / But the voice can be light" (10).

In this direction, I am most mesmerized in this book by the shorter poem called "Broken Angel." The poem begins by noticing "Something which is absent flows nonetheless" and then continues with this list: "'Things live or die' you do admit / That birth is far from painless, you / Acknowledge human helplessness before diseases / Like AIDS—the multiplicity of forms of physical / And psychological cruelty that existence confers" (8). It continues to admit this pain and then to say we still have to do daily things. It

ends with this: "There must always be time for fumbling through the / memorabilia / For putting some order next to the scurrying chaos / If not around it: -a 'running fence'" (9). A fence that moves, one that attempts to order chaos but is also flexible in this moving, might well be a guiding figure for Piombino's poetics which sort flexibly.

# Red Shoes

*Homing Devices* by Liz Waldner  
(O Books, 1998)

**Reviewed by Guy Bennett**

*This alphabet is very small again;  
are there enough letters to spell my way to you?*

– LIZ WALDNER

A HOMING DEVICE is meant to lead us back to where we came from. The poems in Liz Waldner's *Homing Devices* seek to perform that function, tracing the meanders of a road leading back from the present to somewhere she never arrives, slipping from a beginning through a middle with no end in sight.

The book unfolds in the shadow of Dante, whose voice is heard in a quote that runs like a thread through the work: "Midway through this life's journey, I found myself in a dark wood, the right way lost." The poems that make up this imaginative collection are laced with frequent allusions to many such wanderers, fugitives from high and low culture trying to find their way home. We cross Orpheus and Euridice, Hansel and Gretel, and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. We hear echoes of the lost souls in Lou Reed's "Take A Walk on The Wild Side," the people that come and go in Eno's "Some of Them Are Old," and the person trying to find a city to live in from Talking Heads' "Cities," to name just a few.

For Waldner, however, the road home is a metaphorical journey back to the self lost somewhere between a less than idyllic past and still not perfect present. In the autobiographical "How To Make A

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Scientific Principle Into A Universal Convenience,” for example, we meet a fifteen-year-old girl from Mississippi, observe her in her surroundings, witness her forays into sex and dope. In other poems we follow her around the country, watching as she resurfaces in Vermont, Maine, Iowa and elsewhere. In “Time Trials” she has moved up to the present and, now on the West Coast, looks back, questioning time, history, what the past has become, what she has become. “Now I am writing my way into now,” she notes, “again and still, now, now full of then.”

As that line reveals, her journey takes place in great part through language. She is “writing [her] way into now,” and that writing – quick paced and vibrant – flies from one association to the next, moving swiftly in a strong, straight line through a field of allusions so dense at times that we have to run to keep up:

Tares among the wheat sewn. Gaia sewn. Irrigation ditches. Her hemline her shoreline the Imperial Valley. iv. Dynasty. Cleavage. Leverage. Slippage. You, here, this will work if I kneel over you, this is prayer, this is how I believe, this is how to iron a shirt, this is how to mend a broken, this is how to eat your vegetables. Tables, water, turn, stile, actuarial, Fashion Valley. Friend, let us pray. Play. Leisure. Suit. Knight of wands. Queen of cups. Let’s do some dishes, shall we? Cyrus McCormick, his reaper. Grim, the Brothers, Karamazov. Special κ. Battle Creek. Best for you in the morning. Kansas Ok. lahoma. Dahomey. Demeter at home plate. Blue plate special. Her consort, the sky. Winter wheat: the empirical green’s function. He putts. Osiris. Birdie. Tweet.

*Homing Devices* moves like fire over a landscape, taking on surprising forms that are altered, transfigured, then abandoned. Caught up in the beauty and blur of the writing, we realize there’s no need to hurry home – it will still be there when we arrive.

you tilt the cup to your lips, so the waving grasses slant and turn pale before the dark trees, you tilt the world to your lips to drink and send the wind askew, and just before your tongue touches milk, the dark trees sound and you turn as if tapped on the shoulder to see white sheets waving on the night time line and the moon light shines in the cup and the sweet air moves across your cheek and you can wonder where home is later.

# The Returns of Martha Ronk

eyetrouble by Martha Ronk  
(University Press, 1998)

Reviewed by Standard Schaefer

“On a single lane into the woods where would they go.”

THIS BEGINS THIS seeming offhand journey into Vermont in the first poem of Martha Ronk’s *eyetrouble*. With such bleached out language, trees and familiar roads soon pass into vortex: “She has sex organs just about everywhere/her fingers weaving an intricate carpet/and going blind in the blues and rusts of a storm.” Ronk chooses the tactic of diversion rather than opposition, but the language, so often hauntingly impoverished, does not quite belong to the language of masters even when it contains such conventions as narration and the voice of one ruminative speaker. Scrolls, popular songs, tv, letters, calligraphy, Chinese art all interfere with efforts to locate oneself within memory. Often told from within an imagistic landscape, the location nonetheless remains unknown to the speaker even as it is clearly rendered to the reader. It is as if the speakers live in a “fugue state” which prevents them from laying any claim, even on their physical location.

Obsessions make what  
the world was waiting for  
for tv.  
In another city in another town  
in a race for time.  
Because of the fugue state  
by the video store  
by the ocean breeze

*Standard Schaefer is a poet living in Pasadena, California. He edits the annual RHIZOME, likes walks on the beach, easy-listening and dissent.*

in between thought  
was just passing through  
or arranging spoons.  
Or into walls and other cars  
and the mother floats down  
in a chiffon she never wore  
and a pendant feel in the palms  
the itching that shapes things.

In a poem like “Obsession”, one can never even be sure that the video store is a memory and not a current locale. The whole act of memory becomes no longer an obsession, but “the itching that shapes things.” A somaticization occurs. The physical world usurps the inner world in which a memory can be depicted in clear language, but never individualized, never personalized. The speakers are as interchangeable as the common citizen. Ronk describes one woman as one for whom “rock-n-roll appeals to her sense of history.” Uniformly confused, even apathetic to “what it meant having elected officials,” as Ronk says, the speakers are always on the verge, as Gilles Deleuze would say, of “becoming a foreigner in one’s own language.” Readers of Ronk’s syntactically adventurous *State of Mind* (Sun & Moon Press, 1995) will recall the emphasis she placed on “not knowing the language.” In *eyetrouble*, the same point is made as in the earlier book, but rather than simply playing fast and loose with grammar, Ronk focuses on the way her speakers are alienated from the language they employ. Ronk’s speakers are not even attempting to speak about their condition, as if in some “minatory” language, but instead they merely insinuate a variety of simultaneous stories. One thinks of Frank O’Hara’s famous poem about Lana Turner’s collapse. It is through such quotidian detail that Ronk reveals the presuppositions of language and memory.

For example, in “In silence,” Ronk writes: “To sleep in the body of another and to find a face/yet take a walk where speaking no longer satisfies/or the one whose engine seized up and stalled.” Not only is it unclear what has happened, but this confusion forms presuppositions on following lines. “She turns to birds...”. The beginning of this statement echoes the idea of “going to the birds,” perfectly in-line with the possible of story of an automobile breaking down leading to the discovery of a lover. In fact, the woman is looking at actual birds, but

her mind is being drawn to sounds possibly down the hall, possibly a memory, possibly the lover leaving. The phrasing here, with its everydayness of language and image works against the common sense world, the world where one turns toward “the” birds. By referencing the realm of bombed out language (Rock-n-roll appealing to her sense of history) and omitting the article “the”, Ronk reveals how “natural” and “obvious” the real is and how ultimately dizzying. In another poem, Ronk refers to it as “a recognizable clackity clack”. She then uses memory, the deferral of time, to reveal how “fugue-like” her speakers are in the “onslaught of events off the pavement.” This deferral of time is captured in the syntax of such poems as “Dock”:

*Dock* he tells me isn't what we're walking on  
but in Snow White he remember the eyeglasses  
and how can we fish from it, myopic, unsteady  
as I remember the roses on the wallpaper at night  
hatching birds with open eye. Sing is what  
the water does and mosquitoes on the backs of knees  
he peels a bandage from covered in Disney bits  
that wheel his mind like trucks he takes to bed  
imprinted on cheek and hands as he grabs mine  
to steady his step into the rowboat from which  
he sees a forest he to row into the darkest part of.

In the second half of the book, memory becomes hallucination and takes on the qualities of force. As a result, the grammar is tweaked to suit the subject matter. It is still a matter of individual poems, but they are linked also as a series, no matter how fragmented. The unity here is established by a discontinuous death: a man (Samuel Johnston) drowned long ago nevertheless reappears from time to time to the speaker, living once more sometimes as a ghost, sometimes as a motif. Here the language of statement expresses not only the improbable reappearance of Samuel Johnston, but captures the matter-of-factness of the speaker while at the same time allowing Ronk to challenge the reader: “Time was when/See you try to remember it.” Also: “Tantamount to hyperbole is the opposite.” Memory is transformed into the desire for the “intact”, the “matter-of-fact.” The details of what is eaten, what is said, the suddenness of the day and the color of lilacs serve to pull the book back into the present. Ronk writes: “It’s enough perhaps not to go anywhere.” Still, she refuses escapism for the reader, the

speaker, and herself. Forced back to the objects that are before them (“The green glass on the road is a road/to the sea.”), they are never allowed to long for a life they have never lead (“each is a lung filling up with air.”) It is forced, but it is also revealing what is at stake—resistance to interpretation—to that false interpretation which takes place via nostalgia or memory. The language therefore is not merely simple. It is not even an affected minimalism, but rather it is a becoming-realistic. It moves the reader infinitely closer to noninterpretation. “This fuzz is what I’m talking about,” writes Ronk as she reveals how the cracking up of perception is only an interval between intelligence and the social. Ronk admits that the book is a kind of autobiography (neither true nor false, but perhaps “necessary”). If read as a journey through memory, the anonymous woman subject of the book, (and the book does returns to the opening notions of “paths” and “scrolls”, various types of movement) has split. There is a girl “gone to study revolution in Prague” (the social) and there is a poet who appears in the final poem. The final poem is also a memory, but just as much it is also another person or even another possible world. A world never simply accepted nor completed. As she concludes: “The poet keeps reading from right to left.”

# The Magic Slate

*Desire and Its Double* by Norma Cole  
(Instress, 1998)

Reviewed by Brian Lucas

Desires, ordered as they are, at times in a figment of gold

*light on a hand waving light on a face is our witness* at  
the burning: a pile of shale, a skein of knotted planets—  
a cumbersome explanation resides not here, but in time.  
at *The Laws*: so shattered by a state of

conversions

a flux *the flat world imagines*

embers all tomorrow

Memory's business provides the oars carefully,  
lengthening an afternoon into strewn bits of the future's  
double

The music's here in a vanished site

*Auditions for the echo:*

Monuments crowding pages where time left growing  
how-to instructions for an *unmarked body to fly*  
a place defying the miracle of objects it contains

*Brian Lucas is now practicing witchcraft in New York City. He edits Angle/Angle Press and has published a chapbook, "The Trustees in Spite of Themselves."*

A sequence of *Artificial Memory* (the fourth movement defines my author's time, the one living in my house) comprised of shallow holes eventually to disassemble the only collage ever worth remembering

Dear N., The compass is an echo of that *magnetic chain of rocks*, nowhere for a song of starliving to be hid.  
White fuses revealed in the act of heating the image.  
An anagram of desire introduces the currents untied in green ribbon an Other's sky feels a full reign from.  
Wander these with a short endlessness in mind.  
Determine if those stutters are *seen in sleep* and so not dead shards plied about the edges is the advice I give to any fair reader

# Publications Received

## Books and Chapbooks

- LORE* by Laynie Browne (Instress, 1998, \$4).  
*Inside the Hours* by Cydney Chadwick (Texture Press, 1998, \$6)  
*White Thought* by Tom Clark (Hard Press, 1998, \$10)  
*Three Works (Invasive Map)* by Mark DuCharme (Oasis Press, 1998).  
*Friendship With Things* by Elaine Equi (The Figures, 1998, \$8).  
*Rooms* by Dan Featherston (PaerBrainPress, 1998).  
*boy in the key of e* by Edward Foster (Goats + Compasses. 1998).  
*Ex-Finite: Danger's Dancer* by Peter Ganick (Instress, 1998, \$4).  
*One Square Mile* by Henry Gould (AlephoeBooks, 1998).  
*Works & Days* by Bill Luoma (Hard Press, 1998, \$15).  
*Saunter* by Joshua McKinney (primitive publications, 1998. \$4).  
*Mallarme: Poem in Prose* by Stephen Ratcliffe (Santa Barbara Review Publications, 1998, \$12)  
*Blindsight* by Rosmarie Waldrop (Instress, 1998, \$4).

## Journals

- Antenym 15 edited by Steve Carll.  
Arshile 9 edited by Mark Salerno, PO Box 3749, Los Angeles, CA 90078, \$7.99.  
House Organ #22 edited by Kenneth Anthony Warren, 1250 Belle Avenue, Lakewood OH 44107.  
RE\*MAP #6 "Politics" edited by Todd Baron and Carolyn Kemp, 2860 Exposition Avenue, Apt. A, Santa Monica CA 90404-5028, \$5.