

David Antin  
A Correspondence  
with  
the editors,  
William V. Spanos and Robert Kroetsch

*And standing, shrouded there, in that din,  
Earth, the chatterer, father of all  
speech . . .*

W.C. Williams, *Paterson*

*The 'Being-true' of the λόγος as ἀληθεύειν means that in λέγειν [to talk] as ἀποφαίνεσθαι [letting-something-be-seen] the entities of which one is talking must be taken out of their hiddenness; one must let them be seen as something unhidden (ἀληθές); that is, they must be discovered.*

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

*William Spanos (Binghamton, N. Y.) to David Antin (Solana Beach, California), April 6, 1973.*

Dear David Antin: The debate over what your reading was all about still goes on, so in some curious way you made an impact despite appearances. As for me, it was a rare privilege having the chance to *talk* with you. I hope our paths will cross again sometime. Again, I *do* hope you'll send *boundary 2* some of your creative work. I'd be honored to publish it. Both Peggy and I send you best regards.

Bill

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to William Spanos (Binghamton), July 16, 1973.\**

Dear Bill: I realized that time was drawing near for your deadline or for your vacation or both, and I had promised to send material to you. Almost everything I'm doing now is in the form of these poem talk pieces, and I am now aware that they are both long and "difficult." But since you had suggested I send you something of the order of "talking at pomona," I thought I would let you look at "what am i doing here?" If it is something you like enough to print, let me know; or if you are not enthusiastic about the particular piece but are not put off by the "genre," let me know that — because I have others I am at work on and nearly finished with. — How are things going with *boundary 2*? Is there still a grave "money" problem as appears inevitable with magazines or have you temporarily fought off the creditors?

Best to both of you,  
David

Note: in the interest of speed — write to the above address — and above all — don't feel any hesitation at sending it back if you are not happy with it.

\*On the request of Mr. Antin, the editors have made no effort to "correct" his "impressionist orthography and typing." He consoles himself "by thinking of Coxton's spelling and the fact that Shaxpere never spelled his own name the same way twice."

*William Spanos (Claremont, N.H.) to David Antin (Solana Beach), July 24, 1973.*

Dear David Antin: I just got your mss. here in New Hampshire, where we're spending the month prior to the Aug. 15 flight to Europe. I'll get to it right away and report as soon as possible. I'm concerned about the timing. I mean that the Winter issue is already over-extended, and so if this is good we may have to hold it over until the next general number — Let's see, anyway.

I got some good material from Clayton Eshleman on the basis of his conversation with you. Thank you very much for making the contact.

I'm putting the last touches — I hope — on the "spatial form" book *Icon and Time: Towards a Postmodern Theory of Literary Interpretation*, and hope to have it ready for typing by the time I leave for France so I can devote the whole year to finishing the big book on Postmodern Literature. (By the way, I'm seriously thinking of doing a chapter on Olson & Ignatow as antithetical faces of postmodernism in American poetry.)

Best,  
Bill

P.S. I'll keep you posted. As for the financial situation, we're still more or less above water, though the administration is unbelievably hard to convince that we're a worthy enterprise.

*William Spanos (Lake Sunapee, N.H.) to David Antin (Solana Beach), July 29, 1973.*

Dear David: I've read the talk poem you sent me and think it's really great. God damn it, this stuff is *really* postmodern in its "antipoetic" effort to recover the poetry of talking. I've sent it on to Bob Kroetsch, my co-editor, recommending that we do everything we can to get it into the 5th number of *boundary 2* (though I should warn you that he did not respond as enthusiastically to your "reading" at Binghamton as I did). So the main issue, I think, will be whether or not we'll be able to get it into the 5th (Vol. 2/3): we're considerably beyond our allotted page length and will have to do some postponing of materials as it is. I hope Kroetsch will agree with me that your talk-poem is good enough to warrant drastic measures like delaying a couple of reviews. I'll let you know as soon as I hear from Bob.

We got our car to the Port of Newark a couple of days ago, and so have begun the process of departure in earnest. I don't like the feel of uprootedness, but that's what it's all about.

Sincerely,  
Bill

*William Spanos (Lake Sunapee) to Robert Kroetsch (Binghamton), July 29, 1973.*

Dear Bob: I've read the Antin talking-poem and I think it's stupendous, a *tour de force*, no doubt, but exciting not only as content but as form. I find this effort to recover talking a kind of poetic anti-poetry that is truly "postmodern," returning as it does to the kind of peripatetic talk that is

prior to print. Anyway, read it and let me know what you think. I recall your not being especially impressed by Antin the night he "read" [at S.U.N.Y. Binghamton in the *boundary 2* reading series, March 28, 1973], and I don't want to pressure you into something you're strongly opposed to. But there are things in this piece that struck me as being truly Kroetschean, especially the story about the sad lady who found a lover with three red cherries tattooed on his prick. And, God damn, it is strangely poetic, this explorative talk that gets triggered heuristically simply by words. I think it would fit in beautifully with the rest of the major fiction and poetry that we've got for Vol. 2/3. What I suggest is that we simply postpone anything that comes in after the August first deadline I gave everyone a long time ago (with the exception of the article by Johnsen, since we need it with the Harold Bloom piece for the essay section on "postmodernism"), in favor of the Antin piece and Eshleman's "Van Gogh" poem and his review of Blackburn's *Early Selected Y Mas* and *Peire Vidal*. Let me know what you think. . . .

Bill

*Robert Kroetsch (Binghamton) to David Antin (Solana Beach),  
September 14, 1973.*

Dear David Antin: About your poem. . . . Bill Spanos is off to France and I've been waiting for him to get an address so we can correspond. The matter in a nutshell is this. Bill writes to me: "I've read the Antin talking-poem and I think it's stupendous, a *tour de force* . . ." Unfortunately, I find it much too long. I can't get caught up in it. The form invites cutting, so I've written to Bill to see if he will approach you about cutting it. Twenty pages of that text is overkill for me. . . . However, if you and Bill can agree on some reduction, or if you and he both insist that the whole thing must be published, I'll go along with it. . . . We continue to get requests for your essay. ["Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry," *boundary 2*, 1/1 (Fall 1972)]. It seems to have been the most successful piece in number one. Perhaps I'm wrong about your poem.

Bob

*Robert Kroetsch (Binghamton) to William Spanos (Lyon,  
France), September 14, 1973.*

Dear Bill: . . . The Antin piece. The talking-poem. Frankly, I can't bring myself to read to the end. I'd prefer that we publish something like one half of it. So I'm sending it to you with the invitation that you cut it off somewhere — and the form invites such cutting — if you can possibly bring

yourself to do it. . . . Believe me, I understand the way you identify with one who speaks as passionately as do you! But I personally believe in a *necessary* tension between form and the Dionysian. A nice irony, that I should end up being a reactionary old sonofabitch while you are crusading for ultimate freedoms. But that's part of the fun of co-editing. . . . And reading manuscripts without that testing, that abrasion, is finally boring for me.

Bob

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to William Spanos (Lyon, France),  
September 18, 1973.*

Dear Bill: I hope you're settled comfortably and have been able to minimize the kind of confusion that always results from the excitement of travel. Ordinarily I wouldn't rush to write you so soon, knowing that you can barely have settled in, but the decision on what to do with "what am i doing here?" was still hanging when you left – and knowing that you had a deadline for your winter issue i checked with robert kroetsch about the outcome. As you've probably heard from him, he sent me a very friendly note explaining his position. If you haven't seen it I'm sending you a xerox. As you had anticipated he's not enthusiastic about the piece, though clearly willing to go along with it if we are both committed to it. I really feel that I understand his response, but it would be not only impossible to cut the piece but directly antithetical to its significance. I explained this at length to him in the letter of September 18, which I am also sending a copy of to you. My reasoning is I think clearly outlined in the letter to him, and I hope you will agree with me. I also hope he will see my reasons even if not agreeing. Naturally the decision belongs to the two of you. But if you can't see your way to printing it as it is, I would have to publish it somewhere else; and it is for this reason that I am a little anxious to get a final decision from *boundary 2*.

My best to both of you, and I hope that work on Peggy's thesis is already under way and that your book is in the typewriter.

Yours,  
David Antin

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to Robert Kroetsch (Binghamton),  
September 18, 1973.*

Dear Robert Kroetsch: I'm really glad the essay is continuing to excite interest; I also receive requests for xeroxes of it and the address of *boundary 2* which I think is doing a fine job throughout.

About the talk-poem, naturally I dont agree, but I understand your feelings about it. It seems to me that the difficulty inherent in it (its

feeling of length) is a consequence of its oral structure. It *is* too long – for a literary text, which it isn't. And all oral work faces the same problem – that the way the mind works at formulating under these phenomenologically more natural conditions – of being up on your feet and talking – is more relaxed or casual, gradually feeling for doors in a wall say or the right turn off the commonplace road. Naturally it will also take occasional wrong ones, but to erase the false step will also erase the way of discovery. Which is what I am after. I want nothing less than a paradigm of the true working of the mind at some real thing. We have to get out of the hubris of Cartesianism or even Baconian empiricism. And the cost will at first seem very great, because it was the 17th century that named the terms of "respectable" thinking. One may even say they invented "the fact." What I'm offering is one step against this sanctified position as it is congealed into "style." Homer is too long too, and so is Beowulf. Too long for a text to be looked at – but not too long for the ear-mind. I hope and feel my own work is similarly justified. I do think you're making a mistake, but frankly it's a mistake that I have also made. Several years ago I was editing a magazine with Jerome Rothenberg, called *Some/thing*. And there was a long poem of Allen Ginsberg's called the Wichita Vortex Sutra (or some such thing) that was composed, I think, entirely on a tape recorder while Allen and Peter were driving cross-country in a Volksbus. As I remember Jerry and I had a chance to publish the poem-rant and I felt then that it was too thin. By which I meant it didn't feel "dense" enough for a poem; it seemed too much like top of the head talk (admittedly of a special kind). We took another piece of Allen's "Who Be Kind To?", a very lovely piece and very much more recognizable as a poem. It was shorter, more contained, framed as a piece of art. In short – it was more literary. Now I think we were both wrong. I in relation to Allen and you in relation to me. I really can't cut the piece, because if I were to tighten it it would remove the particular qualities that made me talk it. Naturally, I hope that I have encoded in the text (because it is after all being carried in a text) the qualities of this oralness I am seeking; and hope you will see it my way or be able to go with me anyway. Naturally the decision is yours and Bill's. But I really can't cut it.

Thanks for your frankness.

Best,  
David Antin

*Robert Kroetsch (Binghamton) to William Spanos (Lyon, France), September 24, 1973.*

Dear Bill: . . . Antin writes a fine letter that explains why he doesn't want to cut his long piece. You've no doubt heard from him also and may have

written to me by now. I can only say I don't want to put the piece in number five. Number seven will be fine. His letter is enclosed. Please return it. . . .

Your concern about our not receiving unsolicited mss. The truth is, only a few people are doing what we're interested in. And those few people are so busy they do nothing on speculation. Their names appear with great frequency in the few receptive journals. I begin to suspect the special issue is our most effective way to develop a group of contributors and to get subscriptions. The Olson issue continues to bring in orders — and we won't even be sending out a big advertisement until a release date is more evident. The Canadian issue hasn't even been announced and I'm receiving queries, manuscripts. Number 5 is a useful kind of compromise in that it's almost a special issue on Ignatow and will get some of that kind of attention. . . . So when do you propose to do the Heidegger issue? Number 9 at the latest, I would say.

Tarn: . . . I lump him with Antin, a passion of yours — deeply rooted in your particular passion for a particular kind of language — that I can't appreciate. Berryman speaks to me, and you probably can't bear his *Dream Songs*. . . . Anyway, Kessler is still interested and has a budget and I'll certainly cooperate with Milt in attempting to bring Tarn here. If I were in Tarn's shoes I'd prefer to wait until next year and meet with you, do a serious dialogue. I've given readings of my own where the person who invited me or was interested in my work was absent. Becomes a bit farcical. And please understand that I respect your admiration for these people and more, I suspect there's something going on in their work that I don't appreciate. E.g., the enclosed book by Tarn certainly owes something to Levi-Strauss and I'm fascinated (by the abomination) L-S — but — well — *From Honey to Ashes* is better reading than these poems for me.

Bob

*William Spanos (Lyon, France) to Robert Kroetsch (Binghamton),  
September 25, 1973.*

Dear Bob: 1) The first time I read the Antin talk poem I was as put off as you were: overkill. The second time I read it I found it, as I said in my letter, "stupendous" as a *tour de force*. The third time I read it — last night — I found it even more deeply interesting as a piece of experimental oral poetry — or whatever you want to call it. I even found myself *anticipating*, I'm not quite sure what, perhaps the turn of mind. More specifically, (a) there's a structural rhythm — an interspersion of "story" and speculation; (b) a rhythm of an intelligent and sensitive speaking voice, which probably accounts for the sense of exploration it generates, a voice that at the same time is always contemporary *and American*, not

only in its diction, idiom and rhythm, but also in the political and socio-cultural concerns of the content. I am convinced in a kind of absolute way that any foreigner would be utterly enthralled with Antin's *sound* and would want to learn from it. (c) A poetic suggestiveness emerges despite the deliberate "anti-poetic" effort to suppress all the paraphernalia of poetry – metaphor, compression, closure, etc. – in favor of a loose "prosaic" and "stammering" language. (d) The thing *reverberates* with echoes of the past (the oral poetry of Homer, Plato's *Dialogues*, and the peripatetic poet-philosophers, the whole Parry and Lord *Singer of Tales* context) and is at the same time utterly *situated* in the present: McLuhan, the French *parole* vs. *écriture* debate, Heideggerian phenomenology, and, of course, the whole thrust of American poetry towards oral "composition."

I understand what you mean when you say you can't bring yourself to read it to the end and that you believe in a *necessary* tension between form and the Dionysian. Still, I think postmodern poetry is revolting from that imperative as a fundamentally soul-destroying coercion of the imagination, one of the most terrible legacies of anthropomorphic humanism. I'm talking about the hysterical Western need to name the world and about its correlative, the advent of *writing* for the printed page. Most postmodern American poets don't go anywhere near as far as Antin goes, perhaps wisely, because he probably goes too far. *BUT in so doing he also gives dramatic, even startling relief to a crucial postmodern impulse.* It may be that neither of us can justify the poetic value of Antin's piece. You obviously think it's not very good. I think it's damned good (though I'm aware of its essential limitations). But I do think the piece is extremely important in the light of what *boundary 2* is intended to do. And it is on this ground, finally, that I will try to persuade you that we should publish it as is. As for your suggestion that we edit it on the grounds that such a form invites cutting, I can't agree with you, though I *do* wish the piece had been shorter. My reasons should be evident from my comments about the poem in the first paragraph. (I also doubt very much if Antin would agree to its being cut.) I find, paradoxically, that there is a rather continuous structure, on the verge of being tight, in the surface looseness: the rhythm of exploration is what I'd call it. Antin never really *forgets* a single word, at least that's the impression I get.

We visited the 9th-12th century Benedictine Abbey (related to Cluny) at Charlieu last Sunday. The drive along the southern fringe of Burgundy that took us over the mountains of Beaujolais (the Beaujolais wine country) was breathtakingly beautiful. The abbey, like so many religious sites, was pretty much destroyed during the French Revolution: Once again that revelatory sense that Art, especially iconic art, is a symbolic expression of a disdain for the life of man-in-time, i.e., "privileged," came powerfully to me at Charlieu as the guide spoke of the depredations of the French Revolution, the defaced sculpture, the



destroyed stained glass windows, the hacked up columns, the demolished chapels. For the revolutionary, *Art* is symbolic of that disdain — that privileged disdain. And his instinct to break the images is profoundly right. Art should drive us into immediate relationship with life, into inescapable consciousness of the suffering, the agony of other men, where we are obligated to make significant choices. Art as agent of distance, whether it takes the form of aesthetic pleasure (the neither/nor) or even consolation is irresponsible in the root sense of that word. It is terrible to see the literally defaced figures of the magnificent tympan of the narthex portal, the framing floral work and the sculpture (Ascension of Christ) of which were clearly influenced by Byzantine mosaics and icons. But it is also terrible to contemplate the horrors from which these figures were so enormously distanced.

What we plan to do is work like hell for 5 or 6 days of the week and take the weekend or part of it off to travel ( — as long as the car holds up, and it better because it's already cost us about 700 in shipment fees, taxes of one kind or another, and registration). There is much to see in the provinces and we're all eager to see as much of it as we can.

I'm writing madly, but the deeper I get into hermeneutics, the more complicated it all gets. But I'll get there!

Best,  
Bill

P.S. I got a letter from David Antin just before posting this. Both the letter to me and the one to you are persuasive and not at all assertive. Even if I were not enthusiastic about publishing the piece I would want to on the basis of his argument. I hope it hits you the same way. Let me know. Incidentally, what about the possibility of publishing the correspondence or part of it as context for "what am i doing here?" and as a means of making our individual positions clear. Would you feel better about publishing it then?

*William Spanos (Lyon, France) to David Antin (Solana Beach),  
September 27, 1973.*

Dear David: I got your letter and the copy of your response to Bob Kroetsch. And I just had a letter from Kroetsch including your answer. I've written to Bob, after rereading your piece once more and finding it even more interesting than the first two times, to let him know how strongly I feel we should publish it as is. My argument is that, despite our inability to agree on its quality as art, it is very clear that the thing is doing something in the way of experimentation that is centrally postmodern (while at the same time generating reverberation out of the past) and American — especially in the voice — and on this ground alone it becomes important that we publish it. Let's wait and see what Bob's response will

be. My guess is that one of his problems has nothing to do with the piece as such: the problem of space in the 5th issue. How would you feel if I could get a compromise from him by suggesting that we postpone the publication of "what am i doing here?" until the next general number (after the special Canadian issue)? That strikes me as a very real possibility because Jerry Rothenberg is doing an "interview" with me for that one and sending us some poems as well. Since your "reading" with Rothenberg is the context of your talk-poem, the two of you in the same issue would be extremely appropriate. Would you be willing to go along with this solution? It would also give prominence to your talk-poem, whereas it would get buried in Vol. 2/3, since that number is virtually a special issue on David Ignatow. If you accept my proposal, I'll let Rothenberg know — and add a couple of questions to the interview to bring your relationship with him — and your as opposed to his version of oral poetry — into it. . . .

We are indeed settled in Lyon, finally, after about a month on the road, camping in Provence. We've got the kids into their respective French schools and they seem quite happy about the arrangements, Peggy has begun working on her dissertation — the holdings on Scève and the French Renaissance at the municipal library are immense and basic — and I've begun to write. So the year may be a good one, though the high cost of living here, the 2 devaluations of the dollar, and my half salary are going to put serious restrictions on what we can do. (Fortunately I've found that I like the Côtes du Rhône table wines, at about 65 cents a liter.) But in one way or another we are going to taste some Lyonnais cooking, which, we're told, is supposed to be superb, and of course some Burgundian food, along the line.

We've also decided that we're going to Greece next summer.

Let me know as soon as possible what you think of my suggestion.

Bill

*William Spanos (Lyon, France) to Robert Kroetsch (Binghamton),  
October 2, 1973.*

Dear Bob: Just in case the scribbling in the margins of the last letter didn't come through: What I said was this: The only persons I promised to include in Vol. 2/3 were Ignatow, Swann(Zanzotto), Simic, and Virginia Young. I also agree with you that we should, if possible, publish the Scalapino poems. So what have we got?

Ignatow  
Eshleman  
Zanzotto

The problem here is that Young has only one poem, so there'll be an imbalance unless we include a couple more one or two titled poets. We've also

Simic  
Young

had McClosky for an unconscionably long time, so if it's possible I think we should try to get him and possibly McCurry or one of the others, who have only a couple of poems, into the issue.

Antin is still a question mark. On the basis of your remark of Sept. 24 about his letter explaining why he doesn't want to cut the piece (where you say "I don't want to put the piece in number five. Number seven will be fine"), I wrote to Antin suggesting the compromise to him and mentioning the fact that we've got an interview going with Rothenberg and that his piece would therefore be more appropriate in the issue in which that appeared, since his talk-poem had its birth in an evening at the San Francisco Poetry Center, where they both read. I haven't heard from him yet, but I'm hoping he'll be willing to wait that long. How does that strike you?

. . . As for my interest in Tarn, it's not a passion (nor for that matter is Antin's work). But *it is* good, a lot better than 99 percent of what we've gotten so far — and even published, with the exception of Ritsos (who grows more and more a *presence* in my consciousness, by the way) — and above all because it is working in an *important way* with the contemporary materials — Olson, origins, boundaries, etc. — we're interested in. What I mean is that Tarn (and Antin) *know where they are* and in knowing can make their poetry reverberate outward to encompass much larger areas of human concern, not only present but also past. In other words, they remind us or rather show us *where we are*. What excites me about Tarn (and Antin) is precisely their ability to awaken in my consciousness relationships between thought and feeling and knowledge both dormant or forgotten and alive which I wasn't aware of in any conscious way, but which on encountering it in their poetry, generates in me the shock of recognition. This doesn't mean that I don't like Berryman in an equally strong way. It means I like Tarn and Antin etc. in a *different way*. I think it's Eshleman's weakness, for example, that he was governed by a ruling passion in his editing. I've got ruling passions. But can we afford to indulge them as editors of the kind of journal we're editing? We're on the boundary, which means, as we've both agreed over and over again, uncertainty about criteria as to what even constitutes literature. What we *can* demand is that the stuff we get reverberate with contemporary obsessions in such a way that they jar the habitual past into aliveness. Tarn does that, as does Antin. I think you have to agree with me there. But of course you're not saying that we not publish Tarn. Indeed, you mention that we do an interview with him when I return. I think I'd like to do that, but let's wait till I've gone through all his work, which I now have.

Outside of the fact that our winter clothes haven't arrived, we're surviving and even finding moments like our trip into Burgundy last Sunday (Tournus, where there's a magnificent Romanesque church, Saint