

engage you in a terrain of my choosing. And I certainly don't want to claim credit — or accept blame — for some remarkable and unique invention that we will use to characterize all of what we're calling "postmodernism". I'm willing to accept the term "postmodern" because I think that by the end of the 60's we had arrived at the end of a great paradigm — or research program if you like Lakatos' formulation better than Kuhn's — with a long and impressive history, and that what we are doing now seems to be conditioned by a very different view of how to proceed and with what to proceed. It may be that we are at one of those great discontinuities, and from either side of the rift the other seems hardly intelligible any more. For better or worse, I don't think of my "talk-poems" as very singular. They seem merely a sensible way to go on, given the uselessness and triviality of the genres that have distinguished poetry up to now. Maybe they weren't always trivial, but they certainly seem so now.

You say the "talk-poem" becomes "poem as pure content" and I was almost tempted to say "yes", but I realized that I have no idea of what that would really mean. I mean I'm certain that what I'm doing is not a "poem as pure form," and I know that there was an idea deeply ingrained in most modernist art to aspire to a work that was "pure form". And I think that at first what I was doing in the talk-poems — or thought I was doing — was exploring the absurdity of that division of possibilities. I thought I would strip my poetry of every characteristic that could be taken as a formal consideration and that, regardless of that, the work would be as formal or as nonformal as any work that set out on the path to pure form.* Or that was at least one of my considerations — though hardly a major one. Afterwards — after I had done several talk pieces I realized that this was hardly the point — that I really didn't understand what people meant or used to mean by "form" or "formal considerations." Then the whole idea of "form" fell apart for me. There was absolutely nothing there to reject. Consider, what does it mean, the notion of "form" in a poem? — the idea of some arbitrary patterning, independent of what is usually thought of as "meaning". You talk of it as some kind of obstacle to your impulse to go on — as if you imagined yourself divided into a "revolutionary" (your forward impulse — your energy) and a "cop". What's that got to do with "form" and why would you call your uncertainty or your self-defeating impulses the "form"? Personally I don't feel especially divided, or not so dramatically divided, or not usually so. And I can imagine my impulse to speak, to move through language to some formulation, to some new place as being like a kind of walk. So say I'm walking out of my house and I have a general idea of

*In fact Hugh Kenner did a piece on my work in VORT that takes up the "formal" properties very elegantly.

going to the market, maybe because, among other things, I'd like some bacon for breakfast. And I start out the door and run into my neighbor, a very neat, nervous older woman who lives alone in a great big house over the water, and she stops me to ask if I noticed anyone sawing up pieces of her fence. She's an obstacle of sorts. Gives "form" to my walk. I can press on — hurry to disengage myself and get toward the bacon. I'm pretty hungry now. I haven't even had coffee, and her knee length fifties white skirt, which was made for ladies' lunches, is beginning to bug me a little. But she's very nervous and I feel sorry for her — hungry as I am. She's worried because she repaved her driveway, that the local surfers use when they're skateboarding down the street — it has a sharp slope and gives them a good start down the hill. And she had to put up a sign to tell them to keep off till the asphalt was dry, and because she really didn't like them using the driveway and didn't have the nerve to tell them to keep out, because she was afraid they would do something to revenge themselves on her if she offended them, she put up a timid sign warning them to please keep off the driveway for the rest of the week, till the asphalt was dry. And she knew that it didn't take more than a day or so for the asphalt to dry, and that some of them might have known this too, and did I think it was likely they were taking out their anger on her by cutting off pieces of her fence? And I didn't really think so, and told her. And then she couldn't figure out who would have made such clean cuts in her fence with a saw — except some seven year old would-be carpenters who lived up the street. And I thought that was more possible and promised to ask about it in a subtle way, because she didn't want to make enemies of the seven year olds either. Finally I got past her, but now she's a part of my walk, not merely the "form" of it; but she was a lot of its "content" — if you're going to admit these words. She was as much my walk as the bacon, which I don't remember anymore. So where does that get us — an obstacle appeared and became the work or part of the work. Mrs. Laurens walked into my walk. I had a choice and let her do it.

Now you're going to be convinced that I'm negating "imagination" again. You're going to accuse me of assuming that "poetry" is merely "going on." Well I don't really know what "imagination" is either. Not Bacon's mediator between the senses and the understanding, nor Kant's, nor Coleridge's universal solvent. If you mean the kind of generative force of mind that moves out into the world, putting things together, taking them apart, standing them on their end, inventing and discovering, I have a fair idea of what you mean. And I don't suppose it's peculiar to poetry alone. Mathematicians have it, inventors have it, lots of others. But I suppose I take that ongoing impulse, von Humboldt's generative force of language, to be the center of poetry. And because I think we've gotten too far from the center, too far from the generative force of discourse as it forms itself in the mouth and mind, I'm willing to give up just about everything else to get it. Even some kinds of precision,

which otherwise I value kind of highly. I mean I do respect the "form" of an arrow, its logical force, its penetrating power. But invention and refinement are not always the same thing, and you can't always have both of them. The retroflected barb is not as important as the point, fine as it may be. I mean how did we invent the lever? Fighting? Playing? Making love? I'm really looking for the right situation for discovery and invention, and I'm more interested in looking and discovering than in convincing or explaining — certainly more than in entertaining. So the talks can be boring to anyone who isn't interested in looking into the domain I want to look into. It's not a party and I don't care to amuse anyone — especially — but I'm not shutting anyone out either. The "totalitarian" bit — ? — Well, I did say that poetry was "uninterruptable discourse", and I said it as I discovered that it was probably always at least as closed to conversation as science. Maybe all investigations are closed that way — the way narrative is closed to conversation until it's over. And it amused me to discover that science may be very authoritarian, but it listens to its challengers — when they challenge from the appropriate platform in the appropriate way — and it takes those charges into account. Sometimes I think that poetry hasn't taken anything into account for a very long time. In my work I'm trying also to bring it to account.

Yours,
David

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to William Spanos (Binghamton),
October 12, 1974 (Columbus Day).*

Dear Bill: Here's a copy of the letter I wrote in response to Bob Kroetsch's piece. He may want to respond further — or you may want to take up on it — or both of you. That's up to you. . . .

Have you heard from George Economou yet?

Am also curious to know what your order of publication is for *boundary 2*. If you're aiming for June with our issue — which I think is a good idea — what precedes it on the agenda? And where are you with the preceding issue(s)?

Best again
David

P.S. I enjoyed your Olson issue a lot, great range of material, variable in quality and insight and everything else, but I suspect that's inevitable in dealing with Olson. You've got to take it as it comes. In the end it's worth humoring the more or less absurd parts for the valuable parts. A really good job for a great vector in American poetry.

**You might take a look at one of my "talk-pieces" in the recent *New Directions* annual No. 29, which just came out.

*William Spanos (Binghamton) to David Antin (Solana Beach),
October 16, 1974.*

Dear David: Here are the galleys of "what am i doing here?" Our typesetter was uncertain about margins, among other things – and I wasn't around when it was sent to her. So what do we do?

The "Ignatow issue" is out and I'm sending you a copy under separate cover. . . .

I've heard from Jerry Rothenberg (who sent more "responses") and from George Economou, who will do the piece provided I can give him till spring to finish it. I said that if everything else is in by our deadline, January 21st, we could accomodate his essay as late as March 15th, though no longer after that. I hope he'll take the chance. From what he said about the possibilities, I think the piece should provide an authoritative context for the rest of the material.

Best,
Bill

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to William Spanos (Binghamton),
November 7, 1974.*

Dear Bill: I've been sitting here for a couple of weeks with the galleys of "what am i doing here?" in front of me, wondering what to do and what's necessary or possible to do. I'm not a crank and I really hate finicky relations to appearances. So on the one hand it appalls me to say "do it over again!", knowing what a large quantity of time and concern and cost it would mean. On the other hand I hate the look of that straightjacketed right and left margin. It must have been something like four separate times that I've defined "prose" as "concrete poetry with justified margins" and I mean it. I devoted a very large part of my "essay" in OCCIDENT to an attack on the idea of "prose" – which has become a great obstacle to achieving anything at all in language. Mainly because it is a notational style that makes false claims for itself. In its origins what is it? Nothing but a notational style for discourse – talking – any kind of talking. But because of the accidents of printing – the rigid frame for holding type – and because of the rhetorical habits of the kinds of discourse then considered valuable enough to set in type, this notational system, which soon became conventionalized – associated with a number of casual conveniences of notation that became stereotyped in the 17th century: "paragraphing", "sentence initial capitalization" (originally only a mark of emphasis), along with a handful of hierarchically distributed quasigrammatical markers or logical markers ("colons" "semicolons" "commas" "periods" "exclamation points" "question marks"), which were often too precisely conceived for real human discourse (consider what the grammatical markers do to the sense of Beowulf or the Odyssey as they subject phrase

grammar linkages to an orthography based on a fantasy of sentence grammar) — this notational system became an obstacle to the representation of real talk that it wasn't any longer capable of notating without "cleaning it up." Thus the appearance of a language nobody talks passed off as the "valued language," the "standard language of literature" — for which *damn it* and the literature that depends on it! — until we reconsider that "literature" as a mannerist freak — interesting mainly because of its mannerism — not because of its "high value". So this notation is value claiming, and now totally irrational when we're using typewriters and cold type methods that can be photographed as they are. Sure — justifying made sense if you had to lock type in, but nobody does that anymore. It costs too much to use that kind of printing. Besides the printers have priced themselves out of any interest in doing that kind of setting anyway. The idea of imitating it for photo-offset is like dressing a plumber in a grey flannel suit. Okay? That's how I feel about it. I don't want to wear a business suit because I don't teach my classes in one — I'm a goddam full Professor at a major University and I was Chairman of a Department and I never wore anything but jeans to teach my classes. It's another age.

But you've got a real human problem that isn't merely a question of representations — however important they may be. I'll tell you what. I'll leave it to you. If we leave the text as is I want to put in a note explaining the accidents of the straightjacket; otherwise we've got to redo the whole thing. Whatever seems more reasonable or acceptable to you.

I've just received the Ignatow Issue of *boundary 2* and have read through it a couple of times. I want to think about it a little more before writing to you about it. I think it'll take a little effort to comment to you in a valuable way about it, because I'll have to do it in great detail. I think there are some problems in the method or the way you're using the method, but I'm not really sure what they are and I don't want to give you a mere top of the head reply. It does seem to me that there's a certain stiffness that interferes with the flow of the development of the ideas. Like it isn't coming out as one piece, so that interests get checked before they reach significant consequences. But it's not always the case and I don't really think that's an adequate description of what I mean. I'll write you a little later on about it.

Waiting to hear from you.

Best,
David

*William Spanos (Binghamton) to David Antin (Solana Beach),
November 14, 1974.*

Dear David: I am, of course, very sympathetic with your concern about the justified margins. The piece was put through — sort of accidentally —

before I returned to campus this fall, and the typesetter simply went more or less on her own.

We've reset the piece. But there is a problem. Your lines run longer than what our page can take, so we don't know how to make the break at the end of each line. One way out of this is to print your piece (as in the accompanying rough example) lengthwise rather than according to the normal way. The other is to ask you to retype it so that your lines can be fit into the normal margins. For convenience, if for no other reason, we'd prefer to do it according to the enclosed example. But if you prefer the other possibility, we'll do it that way. What is crucial is that we have your adjusted version back by January 1.

I've gone through the correspondence, editing it in the process, and have found it interesting not only in terms of the central issue, i.e., "what am i doing here?" but also of the development of this number of *boundary 2*. We began vaguely with an editorial conflict concerning your piece and in the *process we discovered* the issue on the oral impulse in contemporary poetry, i.e., something we knew — but did not know — from the beginning. The correspondence is, in a way, a *periplus* of the ground we have traversed in the last year or so. Maybe this is the way academic journals ought to get edited.

I'm working on a brief "response" to your reading of Heidegger, which I hope you'll react to. I also want to ask you one or two questions about your understanding of the oral impulse which the correspondence hasn't as yet brought out.

Let me know what you decide about the format of your piece as soon as possible.

As ever,
Bill

P.S. Do you have any suggestions on illustrating this issue (graphics of one kind or another)?

*William Spanos (Binghamton) to David Antin (Solana Beach),
November 25, 1974.*

Dear David: I think the emphasis you put on Heidegger's invocation of a Greek Temple, Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant's shoes, and his walk through "a track — laid down — over and over," has really gotten in the way of your reading him accurately — and sympathetically. The misreading or rather, the failure to respond to what's exciting in Heidegger — and, *I still insist*, to recognize what I also hear in the voice of your talk-poems — reaches its definition if I understand you rightly in your concluding remarks about Heidegger, where you say:

I can't imagine any valuable image for the term "Being" conceived as a presence. Maybe we shouldn't really talk

about "Being". I mean just because we can form some kind of nominalization of a verb through a habit of our grammar, does that mean that it's worth examining as if it had a "denotation" in some remarkably absurd 17th century sense? Why don't we treat the term "being" as still a participle and let it be — ? Just because you can produce a name by a trick of grammar doesn't mean that anything will answer to it if you call.

The fact is that it's precisely Heidegger's purpose to recover *be-ing* from Being in the nominalized sense, i.e., as *Telos*, or *Logos*, or Presence: as Omega, the "still point in the turning world." That is, to be more specific, it is precisely Heidegger's aim to dis-cover the temporality of the word, of "being", that has been buried — and in the process forgotten — by the Western spatial consciousness, the coercive consciousness that perceives and understands experience *meta-ta-physika*, from the *end* and thus from *above* things-as-they-are, hoveringly, as Kierkegaard would say.

As I see it, Heidegger's distinction between perceiving (seeing) experience from the end ("metaphysically") and experiencing it from the beginning (existentially) has its necessary counterpart in language in the distinction between writing or print (the Gutenberg dispensation) and speech, and in literature, between the closed or teleological forms of the Western literary tradition whether linear (the beginning, middle, and end of the "positivist" tradition) or bounded and self-contained (the inclusive circle of the symbolist-mythic tradition) and the open and oral "forms" of pre- and post-literate cultures. In this sense, oral expression is a dis-covering of being or, better, an *opening up* of the language *shaped* by our traditional perspective — our Platonic "eye" — a dis-closing in other words, of what our traditional "visual" orientation towards language closes off — from the ear.

So real traveling in our time (which, incidentally, Heidegger calls "*die Zeit des Weltbildes*": the time of the world picture) is precisely on "a track — laid down — over and over," i.e., where the habit of spatial thought has neutralized, has at-homed, the disturbing and recalcitrant unpredictability of the energies of time (the new) by coercing them into a *graspable* image of "allatonceness." (Keats puts this as an "irritable reaching after fact or reason.") *Providing* one enters into the hermeneutic circle in the right way: begins from the beginning rather than from the end; intuits Being (the Word) not as preconceived goal (a super-object) but as existential process (words or oral expression), *his* process, *his* speech. *Providing*, that is, one *lets being be*. What Charles Olson says about the modern Western mind in juxtaposing Heraclitus' aphorism "Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar" and Keats's definition of Negative Capability is virtually what Heidegger means in distinguishing "meditative" and "calculative" thought: we must be *generous* (the

etymology here is absolutely to the point) before “being” rather than trying “to take hold of it,” to *master* it. As in Olson, especially evident in “The Human Universe,” this ultimately means that speech is ontologically prior to metaphysical thought. It’s no accident that Heidegger begins *Sein und Zeit* by rejecting the traditional interpretation of man as $\sigma\bar{\omega}\nu \lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\nu \acute{\epsilon}\chi\omicron\nu$ — as “The animal possessing reason” — in favor of “that living being whose Being is essentially determined by the potentiality for talking.”

I can’t account for Heidegger’s flirtation with Nazism (though I think the degree has been greatly exaggerated, to the point where it has become an obstacle to understanding him). But I am utterly convinced that his phenomenological ontology does not mirror a totalitarian mind. On the contrary, in being *contra* spatial perception, *contra* metaphysics, he is against totalizing on every level of being. GENEROSITY: that’s the impulse that lies behind Heidegger’s interpretation of man as a talking being and his *Destruktion*, his efforts to dis-cover the truth ($\acute{\alpha}\lambda\acute{\eta}\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$: “bringing out of hiddenness or forgottenness”) on the “well-trod” path. That’s what I hear in Olson’s poetry. And that, even moreso in a sense, is what I hear in “what am i doing here?” How else is one to interpret your reply to Bob Kroetsch’s caveat against its “formlessness” (“Your talk-poem becomes poem as pure content”):

And I can imagine my impulse to speak, to move through language to some formulation, to some new place as being like a kind of walk. So say I’m walking out of my house and I have a general idea of going to the market because, among other things, I’d like some bacon for breakfast. And I start out of the door and run into my neighbor, a very neat, nervous older woman who lives alone in a great big house over the water, and she stops me to ask if I noticed anyone sawing up pieces of her fence. She’s an obstacle of sorts. Gives “form” to my walk. I can press on — hurry to disengage myself and get toward the bacon. I’m pretty hungry now. I haven’t even had coffee, and her knee length fifties skirt, which was made for ladies’ lunches, is beginning to bug me a little. But she’s very nervous and I feel sorry for her — hungry as I am. She’s worried because . . . [a cold-blooded deletion I feel guilty for making] Finally I got past her, but now she’s part of my walk, not merely the “form” of it; she was a lot of its “content” — if you’re going to admit these words. She was as much my walk as the bacon, which I don’t remember anymore. So where does that get us — an obstacle appeared and became the work or part of the work. Mrs. Laurens walked into my walk. I had a choice and let her do it.



GROENLANDIA



VIRGINIA



FLORIDA



MEXICO



The Northern part of America being that is covered with ice and snow which is not possible of this Map, unless we should have depicted the said country in a like form, we have there first or second the little Circle, show how near within 90 North pole is included.





Surely this is travelling — and dis-covering — on “a track — laid down — over and over.” *Homo Viator*, Juan de la Cosa, in the technological *polis*, where everything — on the surface — is tranquil and familiar.

Anyway, it's the search for this kind of truth, which you undertake *interestedly* and at great risk, that I admire and, when it's happening, I find very exciting. You're not *hearing* Heidegger, David.

Sincerely,
Bill

*William Spanos (Binghamton) to David Antin (Solana Beach),
December 10, 1974.*

Dear David: In thinking about the concluding sentence in my last letter, it occurred to me that maybe what I finally mean by saying you're not “hearing” Heidegger is this: that, in claiming the priority of speech (oral expression over “writing” or “print”) you're not willing, at least theoretically, to go the whole existential route, to acknowledge, in other words, that this “literary” priority has its ultimate ground in the ontological priority of temporality over Form (Nature with a capital N) in human experience. I notice, for example, that in your letters and in your articles on “postmodernism” in *boundary 2* and *Occident*, if not in your talk-poems, your commitment to oral expression doesn't insist on — in fact, doesn't refer to — this relationship. And this impression is strengthened by your consistent use of a plastic model (collage) rather than a verbal model to characterize the aesthetics of the “postmodern” impulse in modern American poetry — which strikes me as a contradiction, if “postmodern” has anything to do with oral expression. Words, after all, are radically temporal, especially if they're the words of a speech act, i.e., of man-in-situation. (I'm wondering too if this isn't what Bob Kroetsch ultimately means when he tells you to “forget your Socrates [the platonic Socrates]. Remember your Homer.”)

On the other hand, if I were to epitomize the difference between your talk-poetry and Jerry Rothenberg's understanding of oral poetry, I would say that his is oriented towards the timeless formal patterns (what I would call spatial forms) of collective ritual expression of mythic societies, whereas yours is oriented towards the temporal (time-ridden) openness of individual or existential speech: the *interested* speech of man-in-the-world, not man dreading, perhaps, but man-in-the-world nonetheless.

What's your take on this comment? . . .

It was good talking on the phone last week — and hearing that *boundary 2* is gaining a good audience on the West Coast. Achieving one has not been easy, not simply because of our limited means, but also because there's still a pervasive suspicion of and resistance to the word “postmodernism” in and out of the academic world. I hate it too, but some one has got to start making meaningful discriminations in this new