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ANDREWS EXTREMITIES BRUCE

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Roland Barthes once spoke of the "limit work" within an author's oeuvre, "a singular, disconcerting text which constitutes at once the secret and the caricature of their creation..." The body of work which Bruce Andrews has published since 1973 suggests a different application of the principle of the limit work. Within a nation's literature there are authors whose writing in its entirety constitutes the limit work of a given genre. Andrews may be the exemplary instance of American poetry at its limit. American poetry has huddled so resolutely around the middle axis of the cornbelt that we scarcely know how to calculate what the limits would look like. In the 1960s a few figures exemplified certain limits: Bukowski the beery *noli me tangere* and "Don't Tread on Me" of the colonial flag; Clark Coolidge and Aram Saroyan a flatly minimalist non-referentiality; Lenore Kandel and Michael McClure the prairie orgasm declamation; Plath a Yeatsian *Cosmopolitan* hysteresis; Dorn the hip epic high; Theodore Enslin the looooooong poem[s]; and Ed Sanders the gypsy mindfuck Hellenism of everybody's latent highschool yearbook doodle. Much variety, yes, and ingenuity and energy. But does any of this work constitute an extremity? It's tempting to single out Coolidge and Saroyan, insofar as they anticipate the language centered strategies that manifestly lead to Andrews' work, among others. But their influence is indicative of post-sixties poetry in general: the limit works cited above have all, in various ways, spawned imitators and even schools.

What distinguishes Bruce Andrews is that his work is antithetical to any possible school or group, however much it may have contributed to making the group visible in the first place. Bruce Andrews is a one man heterodoxy not reducible to a component of a communal orthodoxy. If "language poetry" signifies a limit in the field of American poetry, Andrews is of course probably fated to represent a limit within (or of) "language poetry," which renders him the limit of the limit. Curiously, the very limit he signifies is incalculable within the paradigm of the limit: unlimited semiosis. And so I can only say that Andrews outruns limits, overflows into the extremities.

Andrews' is the only body of poetry I know which can be compared in its energetic occupation of space with subway graffiti, "wild style," of the 1970s. David Antin used to say (maybe he still does) that if Socrates was a poet, then he didn't mind being a poet, but if Robert Lowell was a poet... By the same formula, if Phase II, Superkool, Slave, Slug, Mono, Doc and Lee of Fab 5 were poets, Andrews is a poet. To liken Andrews, on the strength of the identifying trait "poet," to Dave Smith or Sharon Olds, is to be grotesquely disoriented. Not that any of Andrews' readers would make that mistake. But from hailstorm central of the cornbelt zone, I'm quite sure all those Iowa trainees encountering Andrews (an admittedly unlikely scenario) would instantly recognize "bad" poetry. Or possibly "nonpoetry." The reason for the difference is quite simple: it is a distinction between those who aspire to enlistment in the bootcamp of National Verse Culture, and those like Andrews who don't.

That Andrews, Silliman and others are rigorously committed to the linguistic inspection of the American state, its polis both vernacular and doctrinal, almost necessarily precludes their recognition as significant "American poets." The authenticated American poet will signal citizenship only by the most deftly Jamesian of nuances; will never blurt out anything that openly acknowledges the existence of ideology, that dread worm of fair poesy. This is itself attributable to the obsessive preoccupation, in workshop poetry, with accessibility and "communication." (It's as if the dicta of Scientology constituted the pre-requisite attitude for the aspiring poet, whose goal is to be an officially certified "clear.") In other words, an ideology of the simple, the transparent, the heartfelt, precludes recognition of those values as themselves ideological.

The borderline poet, like Andrews, occupies by sheer pressure of that interface a complexity destined to look like obscurity to those at the center. It's important to dispose of a lingering attribute of the avant-garde that's misleading: the forward or outward looking aspect, the avant as a scouting or initial penetration into unknown territory. Any avant-garde activity is of course potentially a first exploration; but unless the terrain is subsequently inhabited, there's no reason to attribute to an avant-garde the power of reconnaissance as such. The only calculable

effect of avant-garde or border positions is in what that perimeter illuminates about the already known. This, it seems to me, is sufficient reason to celebrate the work of Bruce Andrews. His is a fundamentally hermetic poetry, not in the sense of “obscure” or “private,” but rather as the substantiation of boundaries, the setting out of *herms*. In Andrews’ case these herms are the vernacular concentrates of American English. Andrews renders the familiar strange; those transparent checkpoints, those words, through which we pass all day as we pass them through our mouths and fingertips and ears, are made palpably and aggressively *mutant* in his choreographies. (“A choreographing of use, and forms of use. The texts are *use-valued* into *works*.” [“Paradise and Method” talk at St. Mark’s, April 7, 1991]) Dance: chora as public space: chorus. Our core illuminated by being reflected back to us from a distance. What if all those pixels on the screen were words and words pixels, dots, submerged, pointing inwards from the halo of the scalp? Andrews’ work displays the viral accessing of the mind by a linguistic dissemination that continually outruns our abilities to standardize it. Consequently, the swarm of words is heteroglossic; but Bakhtin’s term is overapplied elsewhere, so how else to nominate Andrews’ work?—excrementitious? carnalanguage? poems as heat-seeking cybervores? It doesn’t matter, really: why tag a poet like a vaccinated dog?

But the problem remains of the status of language in this most language-oriented of “language poets.” The frequently non- and even anti-referential function of words in Andrews oddly refrains from making the work thin, evanescent, vacuous like French poetry *après Mallarmé*. It’s rather as if all the signifieds were somehow packed densely into the text with the signifiers, but not sorted out, aligned, itemized. Not “motivated”—but not de- or un-motivated either. Andrews is unique in being able to sustain the “abstraction” of non-referentiality while retaining all of the palpability customarily associated with reference. He begins to show us how the signifier is incarnated; how words are like the pointed finger that fails to direct the dog’s eye, but arouses the dog’s nose.

In Andrews’ poems the sensuous is not rapturous or lyrically atmospheric, but thoroughly plastic and physical. In an explanatory statement in his early book *Edge* he stresses the importance of “sound, texture, rhythm, space and silence” as

brought together in "edges, discreteness, fragments, collision." What Andrews proposes to do, by scrapping the grammatical framework, is to exponentially maximize the play of the edges, liberated from grammatical constraint. Of course, insofar as we're disposed to read in syntactic units rather than word by word, it's the "collisions" rather than the "discreteness" that we notice. But Andrews' work is predicated on the assumption that grammar is hardwired into the cortex: we'll inexorably make sense of everything, and to recognize something as "senseless" is not to abandon it but to recognize its oblique status. What his scattershot pageburst sensibility addresses is that extremity where words can no longer be consoled by the security blanket of syntax; where the proper name leers improper advances; where the mercurochrome of conviviality stands revealed, ideologically, as a psychotic pyramid scheme; where structure and logical hierarchy is a binge and purge cycle replicated in each speech act.

The raw carnival procession of words in Andrews' work shows us how utterly isolate and bereft words have become. Not that he says this—the work blares it out sufficiently—but his poems are coagulations of need and desire, not personal such as might be traced to a specific individual, but personal in the way infrared photography registers heat. Andrews' poetry is language solarized. The quality of semantic reversal, or the apparent revoking of meaning, may be discerned instead as opportunities for conviviality in renewed and reframed association: metonymy as community. This wasn't necessarily evident in the early work; but Andrews has explored, along with Coolidge, a sensibility emerging from minimalism as it convenes on the agora. Unlike the performative reverberations in the work of MacLow, where we're invited to attune ourselves to a futuristic animation of words as pure gestures (as in *The Pronouns*), or where as in Cage Buddhist "no mind" seems to entail "no body" as well, Andrews yearns for an animal congregation. Andrews' biomorphic wordiness actually resembles McClure's *Ghost Tantras* more than it does his declared affiliates.

Andrews' work rigorously deploys words as flaunted differences—differences which are not resolved, as is customarily the case, into the rhetorical flow of the sentence and into the stratification of meaning as hierarchy. Reading

Andrews, we learn to savor the words as characters, almost as individual as people anarchically thrown together in a public space, helplessly revealed in their difference. When Andrews begins to introduce extensive phrasal units into his poems, in *Wobbling*, the effect is vertiginous, as we sense the fragility of syntactic bonds and are led to surmise the comparable perils of social "order." Later, such long poems as "I Guess Work the Time Up" and "Confidence Trick" (in *Give 'Em Enough Rope*) mark a threshold of political abrasiveness in which the phrases appear as so many jostling coagulants, unleashed in a rhetorical hemorrhage:

Bass or percussive bass; wacked out nationality — I don t know why you guys are talking about complete sentences, he shoot up anything; come around the store sometime — Survivors will be exiled — Our libertarian (elliptical optimism): I don t play with your pencils — And it wasn t no theory's asterisk, plain characters, rasta devil dogs President-elect; hard debt trap objects — New new, circus of death bride narcotic life dread line dud dumdom dominion — With technically challenging subjects (*Give Em Enough Rope* p. 178)

Andrews modulates and shuffles voices, attitudes, pronouncements, "takes," come-ons, styles of verbal display which have a vernacular range and precision poets rarely attempt. The reader is compelled to make sense of the text as if it were a fluid public scene rather than the portentous dictate of a controlling personality. Andrews' work displays a cunning resistance to the lure of authority—particularly as it inhabits the structural stability of grammar—and invites the reader to resist as well, in the companionable mode of participation. Readerly contribution to such work is mandated at every moment by the text; and, again, this distinguishes Andrews' work from the performative orientation of his predecessors. Andrews' poetics rarely seems the fossil record of what might have been; rather, it's the brusque insistence on what is bearing down on us, from present, past and future alike.

I began by positioning Andrews at a periphery, situating his work on in a lateral domain. It's possible now to reconsider the model. At the center we have, in however attenuated and vitiated a form, a poetry of image. The poetry of image, allied with a mystique of the personal (as opposed to the Rothenberg-Kelly advocacy of "deep image" thirty years ago), is standard workshop issue. The image structure of the poems, percolated through a poetic sensibility, intimates an aromatic associative brew. The liability of such work is its compulsive filtration system: the person—persona: mask—is the anchor as well as the filter. For these poems to work, the very concept of the person has to be determined in advance, in ways that by comparison make formal metrics seem the very paradigm of "free verse". The fundamental estrangement Andrews has persisted in introducing to American poetry is the withholding of the person. If the voices of actual people seems to seep through, at times permeating the texture of the poetry, then his work has succeeded in deposing the display window dummy of the workshops.

Workshop verse solicits person as a function of depth. Images awaken deep associations that lead either to childhood, life crisis, or emotional slippage. What Andrews has achieved, by contrast, is to retain the sense of person as adjacent, circumambient, social. There is therefore no confrontation with the Other, there is instead a polymorphous field of others who come and go the way real people do, as potencies, agents, forces, not personalities at all except insofar as they forward their natures to us in such masks. The abrasions and contusions of interpersonal encounter float free of their customary romance. Bereft of the identifying traits through which the person assumes poetic centrality, the human dimension in Andrews' poetry is concentrated in inflections of speech. The words have to do all the work, and the work they do is preserved in them through their circuit through the reader's attention. The language is never ejected on liftoff. (There's no liftoff: there is, instead, coming and going of the sort Deleuze and Guattari appraise in *A Thousand Plateaus*).

Eradication of the dimension of ascent—high/low, rise/fall—discloses the immense pressures of adjacency words must bear. Parataxis and metonymy are thus not stylistic traits or conceptual tactics but traces of political discord and

accord. As Andrews has noted (in an unpublished interview with Marjorie Perloff) the abandonment of depth (or denotative reference) does not necessarily render the remaining surface reassuring. Andrews' meticulous attention to the corrosives and sublimates of surfaces and edges has rendered the very concept of transparency troubling, at times even menacing. The menace is the monstrous, the open display of a mutation interior to the word as such, the "radium of the word" Mina Loy called it. "The material intelligibility of material. Nearly only the strange makes sense"—adds Andrews (St. Mark's). To which I'll add Paul Valéry: "A man is but an observation post in a wilderness of strangeness. We should speak of 'the strange' as we speak of space and time." (*Analects* p. 291) The word "monster" comes from the Latin *monstro* or "demonstrate." To demonstrate the usages of words is to disclose the monster that animates them. After the fixed point cycles of words, and the limit cycles of genres and texts, we come to the *strange attractor* animating our festive chaosmos.

It should be altogether familiar, but it's still worth repeating, that Andrews' poetry experiments with its medium insofar as it jettisons the indexical or pointing function of words as semantic units. In this regard, his poetry is emphatically anti-literary. It can't be "read" in the customary sense. One might better compare the high-energy display of Andrews' poetry to the pianistic pyrotechnics of Cecil Taylor, or the drip-dynamics of Jackson Pollock, rather than to the work of other poets. However, since Andrews has chosen to frame his linguistic productions as poetry, and has contextualized them within a poetry community partly of his own making (as co-editor, with Charles Bernstein, of the influential magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*), the challenge is clearly to understand the poetic relevance of the limits Andrews proposes.

There has been surprisingly little application to literature of the concept of strange attractors, a term used in physics and mathematics for certain types of chaos dynamics. There are three kinds of attractors: fixed point, limit cycle, and strange attractors. A fixed point attractor is best exemplified by a physical force, like a magnet, that predictably stabilizes energy. An example is a guitar string, the vibrations of which diminish in a reliable fashion to a fixed point, which is the taut, motionless, silent wire. A limit cycle attractor is a periodic oscillation, like the orbit of the moon around earth. A strange attractor is, as its name implies, unpredictable. Strange attractors are found in situations of turbulence; or, rather, strange attractors precipitate the catastrophic conversion of stability to chaos.

The pertinence for literature is quite simple. A literary work is a deft blending together of an authorial fixed point (that vibratory energy which is sustained for a while and finally dissipates) with the limit cycle of a genre (the periodic recursion of form, of generic traits). The combination of these two forces provides an endlessly gratifying sensory appeal, along with the formal cognitive model to explain or interpret the apparitions. Literature rarely has to confront the chaotic, let alone that condition that can be meditated as reliably chaotic or a strange attractor.