



Pre-Face

Since everyone loves a paradox, let me start off with this now-familiar one: the mainstream of American poetry, the part by which it has been & will be known, has long been in the margins, nurtured in the margins, carried forward, vibrant, in the margins. As mainstream & margin both, it represents our underground economy as poets, the gray market for our spiritual/corporeal exchanges. It is the creation as such of those poets who have seized or often have invented their own means of production and of distribution. The autonomy of the poets is of singular importance here – not something we've been stuck with *faute de mieux* but something we've demanded as a value that must (repeat: *must*) remain first & foremost under each poet's own control. And this is because poetry as we know & want it is the language of those precisely at the margins – born there, or more often still, self-situated: a strategic position from which to struggle with the center of the culture & with a language that we no longer choose to bear. Poetry is another language, as it is another orientation, from that of the other, more familiar mainstream, which has, in Paul Blackburn's words, "wracked all passion from the sound of speech." For many of us, so positioned, it is the one true counter-language we possess – even, to paraphrase Alfred Jarry (& to be almost serious about it), our language (& our science) of exceptions.

The model figure here – a hundred years before the Lower East Side works presented in these pages – was surely Walt Whitman, whose 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, self-published, was the work of his own hands as well as mind, from manuscript to printed book to first reviews ghost-written by the man himself. And contemporaneous with that, our second found-

ing work was that of Emily Dickinson, who never would be published in her lifetime but, more secretly & privately than any, hand-wrote & stitched together a series of single-copy booklets (fascicles) as testimony to her own experiments with voice & line. Along with William Blake before them, she & Whitman are the poets of our language who first brought inspiration & production back

together as related, undivided acts.

The work of the (still) present century is the continuation & expansion of those acts. In Europe the years immediately before & after the first world war – what Marjorie Perloff calls & chronicles as "the futurist moment" – saw a proliferation of poet-&artist driven publications, from the collaborative "prose of the transsiberian" of Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay (a powerful multicolored foldout extravaganza) to the rough-hewn books of the Russian constructivists and the movement-centered magazines & books (Expressionist, Futurist, Dada, Surrealist) under the command, nearly always, of their poet/founders. The American equivalent was the first (golden)

OPPOSITE: Bernadette Mayer, *Studying Hunger* (New York and Bolinas, Calif.: Adventures in Poetry & Big Sky, 1975). Cover photograph of the author by Ed Bowes.

by
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age of "little" magazines & presses – central publications for what was emerging as a bona-fide American avant-garde. Writers who sought new ways & languages took charge of their own publication – Gertrude Stein a case in point, whose works for years were published by herself & Alice Toklas – while others (Pound, Loy, Williams, among many) drew from a network (noncommercial, often poet-run) that ranged from Robert McAlmon's Contact Editions to Harry Crosby's Black Sun offerings to the important publications by George and Mary Oppen's To Publishers, linking Imagist(e)s to "Objectivists" & both to the new poetics that would emerge post-World War Two. James Laughlin's New Directions – alive & vital to the present day – came from the same fertile source, which also included magazines & reviews like Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap's *Little Review* and Eugene Jolas's *Transition* as first publishers respectively of works like Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* (the latter then known as "Work in Progress").

The disruption of all that came with the new mid-century war & holocaust, preliminary to the cold war that defined the next four decades. The great European movements were long since gone or – notably in the case of Surrealism – had splintered into warring factions. A number of once marginal poets had received more general recognition (Eliot, Moore, Stevens, among the Americans) and with it access to the commercial literary networks. Others, like the American "Objectivists" (Zukofsky, Oppen, Reznikoff, Rakosi), had fallen between the cracks & into a life of near nonpublication. And the climate, in the decade following the war, seemed unremittingly reactionary, both on its "new critical" literary side & in its McCarthyite political retrenchments.

The story by now is well known, but it is also true – that it was against this background that the second great awakening of twentieth-

century poetry was starting up, not only in the U.S. but in Europe, in Latin America, & in much of what was becoming, increasingly, the post-colonial world. Its two American centers – as everybody also knows – were New York and San Francisco, with links to other places large & small. If San Francisco was the great "refuge city" overall (I think that's Robert Duncan's term), New York was where a counterpoetics flourished in what Richard Schechner spoke of – for theater & related arts – as "a resistance and alternative to the conglomerate . . . [that] exist[s] only in the creases of contemporary society, and off leavings, like cockroaches . . . not marginal [he adds, but] . . . run[ning] through the actual and conceptual center of society, like faults in the earth's crust."

But the actual topography of the new poetry (circa 1960) was at a necessary distance from the commercial hub of American publishing (the concentration of media power in mid-Manhattan). Its terrain included not only the old bohemia of Greenwich Village but moved increasingly, significantly, into surrounding regions – eastward & southward into the tenebrous & loft areas of the Lower East Side, or into what came to be called the East Village, Soho, Tribeca, & so on. Rents then were cheap, & the cheapness, the economic advantage of life in the creases, was one of the attractions for the writers & artists who entered that territory. It was also – at least at the start – a time that was favorable for producing works on the cheap, either printing abroad (the dollar was still at its postwar high) or utilizing new & inexpensive means for the setting & manufacture of magazines & books: increasingly available photo-off-set technologies, but also more rough & ready means such as mimeo, ditto, & (somewhat later) Xerox & other photocopying processes.

The result is what this book is all about: the emergence on the Lower East Side & environs (stretching all the way to Highlands, North Carolina, & Kyoto, Japan) of that kind of

intellectual & spiritual energy that Pound, in the context of an earlier independent magazine & movement, had called a vortex: a place of cultural intersections & fusions, into which "all experience rushes," to make past & the present into something new. The publishers & publications included here represent the vortex, the vital center, of their own time & place. At its beginnings it was also part of that wave of liberations and resistances, still largely self-generated & unfinanced, that marked the 1960s and 70s in fact as well as in the popular imagination. The activity, with its spin-offs into readings & performances, was intense & (in its size & scope) unprecedented. The movements or groupings then active included the kingpins of the New American Poetry from the time of its 1960 emergence: Black Mountain poets, Beats, New York School, along with Fluxus, concrete poetry, Black Arts, deep image, ethnopoetics, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. Under such headings – or in some fertile space between – the poets directly involved in the work of publication included the likes of Robert Creeley, Jonathan Williams, Cid Corman, Amiri Baraka, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, James Laughlin, Jack Spicer, Ed Sanders, Diane di Prima, Vito Acconci, Bernadette Mayer, Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Lewis Warsh, Larry Fagin, Anne Waldman, John Ashbery, Clark Coolidge, Aram Saroyan, Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, James Sherry, Lyn Hejinian, Margaret Randall, James Koller, Dick Higgins, Emmett Williams, Jackson Mac Low, David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Lorenzo Thomas, Dennis Tedlock, David Antin, Robert Kelly, Nathaniel Mackey, even (at several points) the present writer. Yet even so large a list – limited as it is to poets who doubled as publishers – fails to catch the full breadth & force of what was happening there & throughout the world.

By 1980 – the terminal date for this presentation – the situation was no longer as clear as it

had been earlier. The Vietnam War had shattered the image of American hegemony & the cold war had begun to simmer down. And while the Reagan years might have brought about a new resistance (& sometimes did), they also brought a new defensiveness in what became increasingly a culture war directed *against* the avant-garde rather than *by* it. The secret locations of this book's title were no longer secret but had come into a new & far less focused visibility & a fusion/confusion, often, with the commercial & cultural conglomerates of the American center. Increasingly too there had developed a dependence on support from institutional & governmental sources – the National Endowment for the Arts, say, as the major case in point. The result was to impose both a gloss of professionalism on the alternative publications & to make obsolete the rough & ready book works of the previous two decades. But the greatest danger of patronage was that the denial of that patronage, once threatened, became an issue that would override all others.

At the present time, then, the lesson of the works presented here is the reminder of what is possible where the makers of the works seek out the means to maintain & fortify their independence. It seems possible that with the new technologies now opening – computer-generated publication & the still wide-open possibilities of Internet & Web – that the great tradition of an independent American poetry is still alive & well. Toward that end, the contents of the present work may prove to be a guideline & an inspiration.

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