

Waldrop, Rosemary. "Alarms & Excursions." *The Politics of Poetic Form*. [S.I.]: Roof, 1990. Print.

Alarms & Excursions

Rosmarie Waldrop

"Alarms and excursions" is an Elizabethan stage term for off-stage noise and commotion which interrupts the main action. This phrase kept running through my head while I tried to think about our topic because all that occurred were doubts, complications and distractions. So I decided to circle around this mysterious interaction of private and public that is poetry with theses (things I believe or *would like* to believe), alarms (doubts), and excursions into quotes, examples, etc. I numbered the theses to give an illusion of progression which will only make their contradictions more obvious.

Let me start with some of the assumptions of this seminar.

THESIS 1

Shelley: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

Oppen: "Poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world."

EXCURSION

This astonishing kind of importance is often ascribed to poets and writers (mostly by writers?). Sartre, for instance, held Flaubert responsible for the failure of the Commune of 1870 because he never wrote about it.

In the recent French discussion on whether Heidegger's Nazism invalidates his philosophical work, Edmond Jabès assigned a responsibility to writers which is commensurate with this kind of importance:

I believe a writer is responsible even for what he does not write.

To write means to answer to all the insistent voices of the past and to one's own: profound voice, intimate, calling to the future.

What I believe, hear, feel is in my texts which say it, *without sometimes altogether saying it.*

But what do we *not altogether say* in what we say? Is it what we try to keep silent, what we cannot or will not say or precisely what we do want to say and what all we say hides, saying it differently? For these un-said things we are gravely responsible.¹

ALARM

But I am not only astonished, but uneasy with our two quotes, with the poet as legislator, no matter of which world. It sounds to me like a hang-over from the times when the poet occupied a priestly position. But in our time, poetry has no such institutionalized function, and I must say I am not sorry. Or is it a male aspiration? I certainly have no desire to lay down the law. To my mind writing has to do with uncovering possibilities rather than with codification. My key words would be exploring and maintaining: exploring a forest not for the timber that might be sold, but to understand it as a world and to keep this world alive.

COUNTER ALARM

My uneasiness means perhaps only that I prefer a different image while I grant poetry the same importance. After all, poets work on the language, and language thinks for us or, as Valéry puts it more cautiously:

I am almost inclined to believe that certain profound ideas have owed their origin to the presence or near-presence in a man's mind of certain forms of language, of certain empty verbal figures whose particular tone called for a particular content.²

EXCURSION

When Confucius was asked what he would do first if he were ruler he said: improve the use of language:

if the words are not right, what is said is not what is meant. If what is said is not meant, work cannot flourish. If work does not flourish, then customs and arts degenerate. If customs and arts degenerate, then justice is not just. If justice is not just, the people do not know what to do. Hence the importance that words be right.

Bertold Brecht also tells how Confucius practiced this by changing just a few words in an old patiotic history, so that "The ruler of Kun had the

philosopher Wan killed because he said . . ." became "The ruler of Kun had the philosopher Wan murdered"; "the tyrant X was assassinated" became "the tyrant X was executed by assassination." This brought about a new view of history.³

ALARM

The two decades before Hitler came to power were a period of incredible literary flowering, upheaval, exploration in Germany. All the dadaists and expressionists had been questioning, challenging, exploring, changing the language, limbering up its joints. So the German language should have been in very good condition, yet the Nazis had no trouble putting it to work for their purposes, perverting it to where what was said was light-years from what was meant. So, while language thinks for us, there is no guarantee that it will be in a direction we like.⁴

THESIS 2

The main thesis of this whole seminar is that a) poetry has social relevance. It is not just an ornament or just private, an expression of personal emotions. b) Its relation to society is not just reflective or mimetic, not just articulating what oft was thought, but never so well expressed. It can make the culture aware of itself, unveil hidden structures. It questions, resists. Hence it can at least potentially anticipate structures that might lead to social change.

EXCURSION

It is difficult to be aware of our own social and historical position, let alone to know how far our works are expressing the explicit or implicit givens of our society and how far they make them conscious and possibly contribute to their changing. The borderline between private and public is very elusive. On the one hand, there seems to be a fairly high *quantitative* threshold for something to have effect. On the other hand, I suspect that nearly everything we do has some social effect, simply because we are members of a society. (What could be more private than making love — but if you are not careful, and the couple is heterosexual, it may produce a citizen.)

So even if poetry were just expressing personal emotions, it would have a social function, namely acknowledging the importance of the emotions

even though (or because) they often hinder our smooth functioning within a social order.

In contrast, literature as ornament or entertainment brings up a conservative function which poetry can have and which our initial thesis does not consider.

I once got a rejection slip which said: "I do not find your poems comfortable." I was comforted by this statement. There are poems which are comfortable, immediately recognizable as poems. When they more over celebrate unquestionable values like love or nature, they make people feel good and give them the illusion of being in touch with something "higher," some transcendental poetic essence. It gives them what Roland Barthes calls "the good conscience of realized significance."⁵ I might want to argue that even these poems for all their reinforcing status quo still present a small challenge by stepping out of the frame of what is useful. But I am willing to bracket these poems and believe with our THESIS 2 that poetry's function is critical, questioning. Georges Bataille sees *transgression* as literature's essential quality. Edmond Jabès calls it subversive:

Subversion is the very movement of writing: that of death.⁶

ALARM

Jabès takes this subversion immediately to a level where it is seen as the very principle of change, hence of life, rather than directed against a particular social order:

Did I already know that opening and closing my eyes, lying down, moving, thinking, dreaming, talking, being silent, writing and reading are all gestures and manifestations of subversion?

Waking upsets the order of sleep, thinking hounds the void to get the better of it, speech in unfolding breaks the silence, and reading challenges every sentence written.

There is much support for art's social function as a conscious-making counter-projection. For instance Adorno says:

art does not recognize reality by reproducing it photographically, but by voicing that which is veiled by the empirical forms of reality.⁷

Writing becomes action through this unveiling.

ALARM

While part of me wants this social function, I must admit that any such consideration is far from my mind when I am writing and that to me much closer to what is going on.

THESIS 3

The function of poetry is to waste excess energy.

EXCURSION

Let me summarize briefly the main tenet of Bataille's "general economy" which should really be called "economy on the scale of the universe," as given in *The Accursed Share*.

He starts from a given of excess energy derived from the sun and sees the whole history of life on earth, and especially the appearance of humanity, as "the effect of a mad exuberance."⁸

It is in the principle of life that the sum of energy produced is always greater than that needed for its production.

The living organism. . . receives in principle more energy than it needs to maintain its life: the excess energy (wealth) can be used for growth of a system (e.g. an organism). If the system can grow no more or if the excess cannot entirely be absorbed into the growth process then it has to be lost without profit, spent voluntarily or not, gloriously or else catastrophically.

On the level of the individual human being, once the body is fully grown, we get the explosion of sexuality which liberates enormous amounts of energy which are either just wasted or used for procreation, extending the body's potential for growth.

The most general and thorough waste of energy is death. Therefore, on the level of societies, war is the obvious catastrophic spending. For Bataille, the two great wars of this century follow quite logically on a relatively peaceful century devoted to industrial growth. Unemployment he calls a passive spending, or rather passive reduction of the excess. The glorious ways of wasting the excess are great feasts, conspicuous luxury, sacrifices, rituals like potlatch in which wealth is literally destroyed, monuments like pyramids and cathedrals which are far in excess of their practical function as tombs or places of worship, and of course all forms of art.

THESES 4

Bataille's general economy, his notion of waste and excess explains the persistence of poets and poetry in the face of meager rewards. It makes more sense than putting the poem in a context of useful production, let alone supply and demand, even though it does enter the world of merchandise once it is published and distributed.

EXCURSION

Marx/Engels: "A writer is a productive worker not in as far as he produces ideas, but in as far as he enriches the bookseller who distributes the work."⁹

The IRS shares this view absolutely: When Burning Deck, the small press Keith Waldrop and I run, applied for non-profit status we were told: "If you sell books you're a business. You may be a bad business, but you're a business." In any case it is obvious that the energy that goes into writing a poem is enormous and totally out of proportion to any gain it might bring, even if it should get published by a commercial press and even if we include non-monetary gains like reputation, approbation of a group, etc.

ALARM

Poetry is an extreme case in that not even the most successful poet could live off his or her book sales. So a poet knows from the beginning that he or she will have to make a living in some other way — whereas a successful novelist can hope to live by writing. Although again, the more "difficult" among successful novelists (Hawkes, Coover, Barth, Abish, Angela Carter) all seem to teach at least part time.

As far as publisher or bookseller being enriched, this holds for some books, but I doubt that it ever holds for poetry, and obviously not for the small presses and their distributors which have no hope of even breaking even and must rely on grants or patronage. And I would like to see the bookseller who gets rich by stocking small press poetry. In other words, the whole small press world, rather than getting rich at the poets' expense, is like the poets, engaged in wasting energy, time, money; wasting it beautifully.

Why do they do it?

THESES 5

There are more crazy people around than you would think.

ALARM

Nobody can be crazy all the time and still be sane. The process of writing, let alone distribution, cannot be *pure* waste. There has to be a balance between the contradictory tendencies toward growth and toward spending.

EXCURSION

Let us for a moment imagine two writers embodying the extreme points of the two orientations. Bataille's distinction between warrior and military societies seems a good analogy [p. 60]. A warrior society, like the Aztecs, engages in wars which do not necessarily enlarge its territory. They are exercises in pure violence, conspicuous combat without calculation. What matters is fighting and waste worthy of the gods. A military society, by contrast, is rather a business enterprise for which war means expansion of territory, power gain, empire building. The latter will be gentler, more rational and civilized, in contrast to the intense ferocity of the Aztecs. Also more apt to survive.

Likewise, for what we might call the reckless writer the essential is the writing, the intensity of the process, of the present moment, the anxiety and glory of making a structure which holds together. The key word here is the *present*, not being constrained by any considerations of the future in which the work might be read, appreciated, sold. It is a moment of being most completely myself, whether we call it unalienated or mad. In contrast, if I am concerned with building a career I write as an investment rather than spending (though I still spend more energy than justified by the material returns). My eye is on the market, maybe just on the approval of a group, in any case on the future. I voluntarily submit to the order of reality, to the laws which ensure the maintenance of life or of career. Whereas the reckless writer would, in these terms, and at least at the moment of writing "rise indifferent to death."

ALARM

As I said, nobody is pure. For all our anarchic intensity, sooner or later we want our mss. published. We want to be both reckless *and* read. It

is once again a case of Valéry's famous two dangers that threaten the world: order and disorder.

EXCURSION

Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text* applies this same distinction to reading. Reading as *jouissance*, an orgasmic pleasure, versus reading as an educational activity, an effort of understanding and interpretation. Again, only as an abstraction can we separate the pleasure in the effort of understanding out from the purer orgasmic pleasure. But Barthes has given us an interesting word.

THESES 6

The social function of poetry is pleasure.

Pound said: ecstasy, the kind of pleasure which is an enormous anarchic and subversive force, which is why societies and religions, including those of Capitalism, Marxism and Freudianism are suspicious of it and try so hard to regulate it.

ALARM

This kind of subversion does not at all fit our initial thesis of a more constructive critical role. But it might well fit with the notion that writing and the writer do not really have a place inside the social structure at all, but are outside it, opposite.

EXCURSION

Edmond Jabès writes throughout his work about the "non-place" of the book and the writer. This non-place (which perhaps rejoins Oppen's "unacknowledged world") goes farther than the distance from the exercise of power which is often thought to qualify the intellectuals to speak on matters of politics. It also goes farther than marginality: it goes into otherness. Roland Barthes, while admitting that he occupies an official pigeonhole ("intellectual") calls his inner sense of his position "a-topian," being outside even the notion of place. He explicitly contrasts it with u-topias which traditionally are a direct reaction to an actual situation and propose an answer or counter-model, whereas an a-topia is strictly negative.¹⁰ Even Adorno joins in seeing the task of art not in function, but non-function.¹¹

ALARM

Is this wishful thinking? a desire to deny how deeply we are part of our society, how impossible it is to escape the place that birth, education, profession assign us? Is it not trying to make a virtue out of personal alienation? Maybe partly. But it proceeds from the essence of literature which is a negative, not "real," a mere as if, especially as it is no longer endowed with priestly function. But for this very reason its existence alone constitutes an alternative to what is and hence a criticism of it.

So we have circled around to

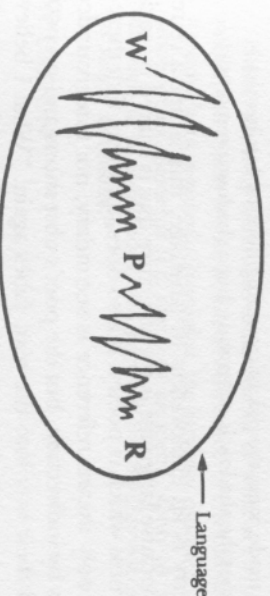
THESES 7

which reaffirms THESES 2:

By its very nature of being "other" literature *cannot help being critical*, cannot help being "an action against the inadequacy of human beings." This is Brecht, who draws the conclusion that "all great men were literary."¹² It is high time we get to the question of how a poem could bring this about.

THESES 8

Not by direct communication with a reader. For one thing, it is impossible to know our readers (beyond maybe five friends). I am in a dialogue when I write a poem, but not with a prospective reader, not even the "ideal reader," but with language itself. Of course I hope that eventually there will be readers who through my poem will in their turn enter into a particular dialogue with language and maybe see certain things as a consequence. We might approximate this in a diagram where the circle represents the language environment shared in varying degrees by author and reader.



W = Writer
P = Poem
R = Reader

I mean this dialogue with language quite literally. When I begin working, I have only a vague nucleus, an energy running to words. As soon as I start *listening* to the words, they reveal their own vectors and affinities, pull the poem into their own field of force, often in unforeseen directions, away from the semantic charge of the original impulse.

EXCURSION

Jabès: "The pages of the book are doors. Words go through them, driven by their impatience to regroup. . . . Light is in these lovers' strength of desire."

Oppen: "When the man writing is frightened by a word, that's when he's getting started."

Olson: Not the "thing" [and not the "not just"] but what "happens between."¹³

THESIS 9

A poem is primarily an exploration of language. This view is shared by linguists like Roman Jakobson and Paul Valéry:

EXCURSION

Valéry:

When the poets repair to the forest of language it is with the express purpose of getting lost; far gone in bewilderment, they seek cross-roads of meaning, unexpected echoes, strange encounters; they fear neither detours, surprises, nor darkness. But the huntsman who ventures into this forest in hot pursuit of the "truth," who sticks to a single continuous path, from which he cannot deviate for a moment on pain of losing the scent or imperiling the progress he has already made, runs the risk of capturing nothing but his shadow. Sometimes the shadow is enormous, but a shadow it remains.¹⁴

When I say poetry is an exploration of language, this is not a retreat from the social because language is the structure that is shared by society and this otherness which is poetry. It also does not mean that there is no reference. It only means reference is secondary, not foregrounded. The poem works by indirection, but the poet's obsessions and preoccupations will find their way into the text. Jabès again: "What I believe, hear, feel is in my texts which say it, *without sometimes altogether saying it.*"

EXCURSION

In the early stages of my writing all the poems were about my mother and my relation to her. Rereading them a bit later, I decided I had to get out of this obsession. This is when I started to make collages. I would take a novel and decide to take one or two words from every page. The poems were still about my mother. So I realized that you don't have to worry about contents: your preoccupations will get into the poem no matter what. Tzara ends his recipe for making a chance poem by cutting out words from the newspapers and tossing them in a hat: "The poem will resemble you."¹⁵

THESIS 10

The poem will not work through its content, through a message which in any case would speak only to the already converted, but through its form.

EXCURSION

Brecht:

The presentation has to be unusual to get the reader out of the shelter of his habits, so that he pays attention and understands and, we hope, will react less in accordance with norms.¹⁶

Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*:

Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same.¹⁷

Adorno:

[Since] art is by definition an antithesis to what is . . . it is separated from reality by the aesthetic difference. . . . It can only act on it through its *immanente Stimmigkeit*, the intrinsic rightness of the relation of its elements [i.e. through its form]. Only as a totality, through all its mediations, can the work become knowledge, not in its single intuitions.¹⁸

EXCURSION

I would like to give two examples of poems with explicit social content.

The first is Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*:

1

Forty feet above the ground on a telegraph pole,
the lineman
forced the spur he wore into the pole and,
throwing his other leg around it,
leaned over

to fasten a line with his nippers
to the end of a crossarm
by a wire around the glass cup on a pin.

The line, hauled tight
hundreds of feet ahead of him
by means of a reel,
broke,

and the crossarm
broke where it was fastened to the pole:
he fell headlong
to the stones below.

2

It was a drizzling night in March,
The street lamps flashed twice:
a break in the connection,
and all hands were looking for it.

When the policeman saw him first,
the colored man was carrying a short ladder
that the hands used
in climbing the electric-light poles.

The policeman next saw him hanging on a pole,
his overcoat flapping in the wind,
and called to him but got no answer.

They put the dead body on the counter of a shop nearby:
the skin was burnt on the inside of both his hands;
his right hand was burnt to the bone.
The insulation was off of part of the "shunt cord" he had carried
and his skin was sticking to the naked wire.

3

There were three on the locomotive:
the flagman, the fireman, and the engineer.
About two hundred yards from the man —
stone-deaf —

the flagman commenced ringing the bell;
within about a hundred yards
the engineer commenced sounding his whistle:
thirty or forty short blows.

The man did not get off the track or look around. . . .¹⁹

This seems to contradict what I said about indirection. But by operating with distance, without any kind of commentary or explanation or even just fuller details, Reznikoff goes against our expectation of empathy. He lets the flat language of the news note stand as is, but accumulates the instances into a testimony to a society which not only causes such daily disasters in the name of industrial progress, but reports them in this manner.

The German poet Helmut Heissenbüttel very often works with Gertrude Stein's technique of avoiding of nouns and replacing them by words with an implicit reference to context, like pronouns, connectives, auxiliaries and dependent clauses. He often uses the refusal to name for social and political comment. The unstated words assume the aura of the taboo, and all the relative clauses, the *its* and *thats* imply hedging. This can be very funny, for instance when the taboo is sexual as in "Shortstory" where by the end everybody has had "it" with everybody else, including himself. In contrast, take an excerpt from the poem "Final Solution":

they just thought this up one day
who just thought this up one day
it just occurred to them one day
whom did it just occur to one day
someone of them it just occurred to someone of them
someone of them just thought it up one day
one day just someone of them just thought it up
or perhaps a number of them thought it up together
maybe it occurred to a number of them together
and how did they do what had occurred to them

if you want to do anything at all you've got to be for something and
not just anything you just think up but something you can be for
alright or at least something that many like to be for or at least
something you think many like to be for

and so they just thought it up one day

they thought it up and they hit on it when they wanted to start
something but what they hit on wasn't something you could be for
but you could be against or better yet something you could get

most people to be against because when you can get most people to be against something you don't have to be very specific about what you can be for and the fact that you don't have to be very specific about this has its advantages because as long as they can let off steam most people don't care what they are for

and so they hit on it when they'd started to just think up something like that

they hit on the idea that what you're against must be something you can see touch insult humiliate spit on lock up knock down exterminate because what you can't see touch insult humiliate spit on lock up knock down exterminate you can only say and what you can only say can change and you never really know which way it will turn no matter what you say against it.

and so they hit on this and did it

so they hit on this and did it and when they had done it they tried to get most people to go along and when they'd gotten most people to go along they hit on the idea that what you're against can still change as long as it's still around and that only what's gone can't change and so they forced those they'd gotten to go along to destroy what they'd been gotten to be against to regard it like Malaria mosquitoes or potato bugs which you've got to exterminate. . . .²⁰

It is true that we are given a reference in the title, but what the poem is "about," the reference it constructs, is not so much the "final solution" itself, but the postwar German feeling about it: the wish not to talk about it, the wish it would go away, and yet its inescapable presence in the mind, in the relentlessness of the poem. Its power lies exactly in the fact that the text does not state what it was "they" thought of, what it was they could get people to be against. Nothing but this circling around an unnamed middle could convey so much ambivalence.

THESIS 11

For the form to be unusual is has to go against expectations by breaking some convention, rule, established tradition, law, whether literary or more general.

EXCURSION

Bataille:

Men differ from animals by observing laws, but the laws are ambiguous. Men observe them, but also need to violate them. The transgression of laws is not from ignorance: it takes resolute courage. The courage necessary for transgression is an accomplishment of man. This is in particular the accomplishment of literature whose privileged moment is challenge. Authentic literature is promethean.²¹

Or, as Tristan Tzara put it more succinctly: "We must destroy the pigeon holes."¹⁴

The possibilities for breaking laws in writing are of course infinite. I would like briefly to talk of two very fundamental targets of attack, logic and meaning.

EXCURSION

I am certainly not the first person to say poetry is an alternate logic. It is not illogical, but has a different, less linear logic which draws on the more untamed, unpredictable parts of our nature.

This is part of what I think my *Reproduction of Profiles* addresses, from which I read at the beginning [of this session]. It works with a logical syntax, all those "if-then" and "because," but constantly slides between frames of reference. It especially brings in the female body and sets into play the old gender archetypes of logic and mind being "male," whereas "female" designates the illogical: emotion, body, matter. And I hope that the constant sliding challenges these categories.

What I worked on consciously, though, was the *closure* of the propositional sentence. This was a challenge to me because my previous poems had mostly worked toward opening the boundaries of the sentence by either sliding sentences together or by using fragments. So here I accepted complete sentences (most of the time) and tried to open them up from the inside, subvert the correct grammar and logical form by these semantic slidings. Needless to say, the opening of closed structures would also be a thought pattern that could be useful in a social context, but while we write we are, as Cervantes says in *Don Quixote*, working on the back of a tapestry, working out patterns of colored threads without knowing what the picture is going to look like on the front.

EXCURSION

Steve McCaffery has applied Bataille's economics to an attack against

the privileged position that meaning holds in literature.²² He makes "meaning" the equivalent of wealth, the reward and "destination of the de-materialization of writing" which for him is what makes a text into merchandise. So his idea of a "general economy" of writing is the destruction of an absolute, fixable meaning, and this can range from the "nomadic meaning" of metaphors and any other kind of multivalence to sound poems and texts which refuse or at least delay meaning. As an example of the latter he quotes from Charles Bernstein's *Poetic Justice*, where we recognize the meaning of "inVazoOn uv spAz," but not without having been slowed down by the unusual spelling and capitalization.

This is actually closer to Ezra Pound's economics than to Bataille's. McCaffery introduces an abstract-concrete dichotomy: meaning versus the sound and shape of the words, and then uses the analogy of money which is abstract, symbolic energy, to discredit meaning. This is much like Pound, where anything concrete is good, where gold, the concrete metal, "gathers the light against it," but money and all banking operations are abstract and evil. Whereas Bataille wants the waste of energy in all its forms, not just the symbolic ones like objects or money, but human lives, work, anything.

However, I agree that it is one of the important tasks of poems to short-circuit the transparency that words have for the signified and which is usually considered their advantage for practical uses. Susanne Langer says: "A symbol which interests us *also* as an object is distracting."²³ It distracts from the reference, from what is symbolized. But this is exactly what poems want: to attract attention to the word as object, as a sensuous body, keep them from being mere counters of exchange. For Jakobson, it is the poetic function of language to make words "palpable,"²⁴ and Sartre's *What is Literature?* accepts as the basic difference between prose and poetry that poetry treats words as things rather than signs, that it is more like painting or music than like prose.²⁵

ALARM

I have not kept clear borders between genres in this essay, many of whose statements are about literature in general or even all the arts. But perhaps Sartre has put his finger on a crucial difference and we need to rethink all this in terms of poetry versus prose.

EXCURSION

Let me give you one more example from a book of mine, *The Road Is*

Everywhere or Stop This Body:

Exaggeration of a curve
exchanges
time and again
beside you in the car
pieces the road together
with night moisture
the force of would-be sleep
beats through our bodies
denied their liquid depth
toward the always dangerous next
dawn bleeds its sequence
of ready signs²⁶

Here the target is more strictly grammatical. The main device is that the object of one phrase turns into the subject of the next phrase without being repeated. I was interested in extending the boundaries of the sentence, of having a nearly unending flow which would play against the short lines that determine the rhythm. And since the thematic field is cats and other circulation systems I liked the immediate effect of speed.

However, it also comes out of my feminist preoccupation. The woman in our culture has been treated as the object par excellence — to be looked at rather than looking, to be loved and have things done to rather than being the one who does. So I propose a pattern in which subject and object function are not fixed, but temporary, reversible roles, where there is no hierarchy of main and subordinate clauses, but a fluid and constant alternation.

ALARM

There remains the huge doubt, the nagging suspicion of a quantitative threshold. So maybe our poems offer a challenge to the ruling grammar, offer some patterns of thinking and perception which might not be bad possibilities to consider. But how many readers does a small press book reach? Even if all 1000 copies of a typical press run get sold, even if they all reach readers how much effect is this book going to have on society? None, I am afraid. I suspect it takes similar patterns appearing in many disciplines at the same time, even though I have acted in this paper as if there existed nothing but society on the one hand and writing on the other. For instance, many of the characteristics of innovative art which bother people to this day (discontinuity, indeterminacy, acceptance of the unescapable human reference point) were anticipated

in science by the turn of the century. In contrast, the fact that they are still an irritant in art would seem to show that it takes art to make people aware of the challenge to their thinking habits or that the challenge has to come in many arcs. It also gives us an inkling of how *slowly* mental habits change.

EXCURSION

One last word on the development of the small presses which is a curious and more tangible example of interaction with society. In the early sixties, when Keith Waldrop and I were graduate students wanting to start a magazine, the quotes from printers were completely unaffordable, but we found we could buy a small letterpress for \$100. We had stumbled into a moment of technological development when offset printing had proved cheaper than letterpress, so printshops all over the country were dumping their machines. And more and more small presses sprang up, not all using letterpress, but in the early days a good many because this particular technology was accessible (as is now computer typesetting). I remember a bookseller in Ann Arbor whose eyes lit up when we told him about the press: "With a mimeo you can start a party, with a printing press a revolution." It is not quite a revolution, but it very quickly became more than just a few kooks printing little books. Over the past 30 years small press publishing has snowballed into an alternative to commercial houses — to the point that it gives them a good conscience about taking even fewer financial risks! They now say: a small press can do this better than we could. But small press publishing has also had enough impact that a conservative agency like the National Endowment for the Arts admits that our literature would be much poorer without it and offers occasional grant help.

Whether all this will produce or contribute to a revolution in our thinking or amount only to a little putsch remains a question.

DISCUSSION

KABU OKAI-DAVIES: Much of what you said seemed to speak to my own situation. For example, your quotation from Jabès: A writer is responsible for even what he does not write. How about when you adopt a language or vice versa, and this language is not able to express your own native language or peculiar experience, i.e., mother tongue and world view, and [yet] the native language hasn't expanded enough to meet the demands of your global experiences. Worst of all you don't know how to write in your mother tongue; yet this language you have adopted is beginning to think for you and therefore interprets your experiences contrary to what you mean. The language you have adopted is subverting your own psychic self. You grow to distrust the language itself. You are caught in a situation where you cannot communicate anymore. So can you hold the writer responsible for even not writing at all? [laughter]: neither the language that he has adopted nor his native language?

BRUCE ANDREWS: Perhaps you could say something about Celan in responding to that question.

WALDROP: This is curious because, maybe to a slightly lesser degree than yours, this is also my problem. I came to English when I was — well, I had had it in school but I came to this country [from Germany] when I was 21. So I changed languages also. And I know what you mean, this very strange feeling that you have no language at all because your native language has sort of evaporated or seems not relevant and the new language is not really yours, so they fight each other. This is hard to live with, to an extent, but it is also actually an advantage, because it makes you very conscious that you don't ever own the language, that the language is larger than you, that it is not simply a tool that you are the master of that you can use. And I think that this is a useful, a healthy position to have this sort of distance of being caught between the structures. And it also means that you really have different patterns always present so that you in a way are always less susceptible to be gullible to these phrases that do influence our thinking. This "language thinks for us" which can be good and bad. So I think it works both ways, as a problem and also as an advantage.

OKAI-DAVIES: My problem is different than a Singer or a Brodsky who can write in their native languages — Yiddish or Russian. I can't write in Ga or Ashanti (Twi). I was not taught to read and write in my native language since the formal education in Africa is still Eurocentric in language and orientation. And though many of the African languages are written