

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAN DAVIES

Larry Price

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Larry Price: I'm curious about the idea you posed the other night, that of being constituted by the others, that you sat there as the nominal reason for the occasion, but that, in fact, you were much more interested in a reverse structure. I'd like to hear about what you think about having said that, whether that's something that's occurred to you before, or whether that was simply suddenly to be said.

Alan Davies: It occurred to me before in a more individual way. In other words, by virtue of individual relationships with people that I care about, I came to realize that at any given moment I was constituted of the moments that I had spent with them and with myself in their presence, and with myself in the presence of my own past as an individual. So that focussed my attention in the process of giving that talk or monitoring that discussion or encouraging that thinking, to pay attention to the other individuals that were present, and really to credit them with their form of address, relative to that occasion, even when their form of address relative to that occasion was to audit... even when they were there as auditors, their contribution was still audible. My remarks were really occasioned by my own experience in that past of realizing the importance to me of human intercourse and discourse and dialogue and my commitment to that and also the fact that that level of experience or that aspect of my experience seemed so rich and to carry so much weight relative to me that I couldn't help but feel that I was made of it and by it, to a large extent. Therefore, an occasion like the occasion of the talk at New Langton Arts, where I had somehow been empowered and paid to monitor or to encourage or to talk or to lead or to direct, specifically I suppose to talk, then choosing rather to do some of those other things... It was that that type of occasion seemed therefore like an ideal moment to admit and to encourage and to say that whatever I am saying, I am saying in large part as a function of what has been said to me by the multiplicity of persons in and out of this room, particularly by the people in the room insofar as they are writers and speakers and talk-givers also, so to have had the occasion to have experienced them at whatever level they were at at given periods in their development and thinking, and so on, contributed to what I am. So I wanted to stress that about the occasion so that I wouldn't feel what some others seem to want me to feel, which is that I had to be in control in some kind of obdurate and arbitrary and willed and kind of muscular way. I didn't want to feel that. I wanted to relax and do what I did —talk to people and listen to people and let really the occasion speak for itself. To the extent that I was impelled to monitor

the occasion, which is really what I think I did, I did a little bit more of the speaking and a little bit more of the encouraging and tended to answer questions more than to ask them, and that part of the structure is something that I would as willingly do without really. But given that aspect of what a talk has been, what series of talks have been like in the past, and so on, and accepting that, it seemed important, not just germane, but important to say that alright, we're all speaking here, even those of us who are saying nothing. We're all present as a form of this address. Collectively, we're howling about something here in the night. I'm speaking loudest and most frequently. Others are speaking in different ways, and different forms of discourse and dialogue are entering in. People are being... some are threatened, some are encouraged, some are enlightened, some are challenged, some are bored, some are writing, some are thinking back, some are thinking ahead. But clearly everyone was immanent. And by virtue of the fact that my name had been announced, I was maybe the catalyst that permitted that immanence at that moment, or maybe the nib of the pen, or something like that. So I felt that that was my function, but I wanted everyone to realize that they were the content, that collectively we were the content of the evening, that that content needed to live and to grow and to become erect and to flourish through the course of the talk.

LP: That says a great deal about discourse, as a 'thing'. On the one hand, it values it, but on the other hand, of course, it de-values it... fairly strongly. The sense I get is of discourse being something like a marker. That is, a dollar bill, in itself, worth nothing, in fact, perhaps, offensive. And yet because it *moves*, it attains that value. In other words, you seem willing to engage in discourse because it *will* move. That is, it does have a pretty wide aspect to it —person to person, hand to hand, mouth to mouth. And that's what gives it its value. However, that can get out of control. So that I wonder... insofar as value is effervescent, it nonetheless... the structure can circumvent value and do damage. Which seems to prescribe monitoring and correction. So that my question is: What senses do you have of 'truth'? Where does truth as a body take up?

AD: Well, discourse, to speak about that for a minute, is lubricated, in some way. It doesn't occur without palm oil. That was part of... I was, in a sense... my function, or the function of someone in the situation like that is to —on a superficial level or in a humanist interpretation— the function is to be like the litmus paper, in a certain sense. In other words, here I come from New York and I'm dipped into this situation in San Francisco to see whether it's acidic or alkaloid. You can view it from a humanist point of view in that way. In reality, it's more like being... and it's not an unpleasant thing... but in reality it's more like the money that changes hands to make the deal go down. And I think that that's natural, because discourse is lubrication. It's what lubricates life, in a certain way, for better or worse. Sometimes there's a lot of grit in it, particularly when the people doing it think of it as matter... think of it as mattering. Then it can get pretty gritty and the lubrication fails to lubricate. The smoothness is set aside because of the oracular sense of what it is to lubricate. But... so there's an aspect in that, sort of, interchange

similar to that of being the money that changes hands to make the deal go, or whatever. Truth I don't have any sense of.

LP: Let me suggest one. Your two examples of the litmus paper and the palm oil, that is, the exchange, are both examples of metonymy. In the litmus case, *testing* the context, whatever, as contiguity, is being suggested as content. The other side of that would be metaphor, and one might suggest that metaphor is invariably the instance in which truth, previously repressed, avoided, or denied, returns. And that's the access to that, not necessarily bringing it, delivering it, but different from an exchange that simply glides along the structures of that avoidance. So that monitoring... I mean, I saw a very clear case of monitoring, whether or not intended... the situation at your talk nonetheless fell out as an instance of you providing an excellent screen for projecting, collectively and individually, the examples of what is being talked about. So in that sense, truth.

AD: I don't, you know, believe in truth as a final, or even temporary term, myself. I don't believe in it. I wrote a piece called "Lies", and the first line was "Truth is lies that have hardened". My sense of it is that there's no object or goal, for me, as a writer or as, you know, living being. So there's no end like that. I don't posit an end, and I can't make myself do it. I can't, having tried for a time, make myself posit any end like that, any goal, whether truth or enlightenment or social justice or accomplishment or fame or success. I can't be that arbitrary with myself, if you will. So that if truth is anything for me, it's just maximum access to whatever there is, so that the more that I can have of what surrounds me of what I am, that's it. I don't know. I wouldn't call it truth. But that's it for me.

LP: Yes, I think that falls out well. Because I heard a number of instances the other night suggesting that you ought to have taken control, or that someone ought to, in this process we're talking about, that is, writing. The issue is control. On the other hand, you seemed to suggest the other night that this was a break, that this marked a new phase. But I heard a great deal of quotation in the talk —out of *Name*, for example. A lot of sentences would begin as first lines from that suite. It seemed of a piece.

AD: I don't think there's any particular discontinuity, and I wouldn't want to lay claim to any. But there are moments of realization, and in that sense, moments when things do come true, to that extent. There are moments when things simply mature, when it's time to pick the apple and eat it. In that sense, I've noticed change and recognize change and feel change, but I don't privilege it, which means that I'm willing and happy to listen to the experience of people whose experience is quite different and who imagine their experience always to be other. And the whole concept of 'other' strikes me as odd, and that Barrett [Watten] should use that as a way of wishing, on his part, that I had been other, and saying that, Alan, I wish you had been the 'other person', didn't let people talk so much and take the conversation elsewhere and talk about things that didn't interest him. But I don't have any sense of myself certainly as the 'other'. In fact, like 'truth', I think it's a completely worthless term. And I just started writing a poem called "Fuck You War", addressed to war. The first line of the poem is "There is no other", which

seems like a clear way to me of attacking war with words, and also a clear way of attacking the idea of the other, by showing what, at its extreme, it permits. So that was another thing I wanted the talk to accomplish and that I'd like my writing to accomplish in some ways. I don't want there to be the other. I don't want the reader to be the other or to think of myself as the 'other person' or an 'other'. I can't see any sense for it in psychology, or anywhere else. There is no 'other'. I mean, it's an absurd notion. I don't know whether it was encouraged by structural anthropology, or what, but it's just too strong a notion to stand, really. I mean, it's too isolated. It's too isolated a sense of —whatever. Perhaps, it's the last rigid corpse-like integering of the romantic, in some way, that the other is this big thing that has to be dealt with in psychology and analysis and by psychiatrists and by writers and by language theoreticians and by Kristevas the world over. But there just isn't... I can't see it.

LP: It's curious that you eliminate both of those, because in some ways they stand as necessary opposites. Once you eliminate the 'other', in your analysis, then, asymptotically, you've achieved the other pole of 'truth'.

AD: It's like wiping out the game... no black king, no white king.

LP: Yes... A related question... you seem aptly to distribute your life —job, bed, market, food, body, writing. And, on the other, in the writing itself, that is, in the poems, there seems always to be a high level of abstraction, an insistent abstraction, which seems to frame those places to be. It doesn't resolve, and that's fine. What do you recognize in that?

AD: Yeah, it's a funny point. It has to do with the fact of writing at all. Some things go to your head, right? And you want them up there, at least, for a period of time, and as quickly and as accurately. So it's a funny feature of bothering to write at all, particularly for someone, like myself, who doesn't privilege writing, as you noted, over those other things. I don't privilege any occasion over any other occasion, really. I just can't see a reason for doing so. Things happen. They come and go. I direct them to the extent that I can and want to, and enjoy them completely, whether I succeed in getting what I want or not. The occasions seem just multifarious, fascinating, fabulous, and I'm only going to be around here once. And I'm going to keep my eyes open. So basically, that's the source of my joy in being alive and the function of my joy. So writing is, and has to remain, really, a curious anomaly, for anyone, I think, and particularly for someone who has just said what I just said... to bother to permit... I mean, the abstraction, what you called abstraction is a coloration, a peculiar coloration. So to permit these unusual blemishes to flourish, and to encourage the ones that are beautiful, seems odd in a certain way, and a little bit queenish, in a funny way, I think. I make no apology. I've just always done it and always thought that I would, and I probably always will, in some way or another. But I think you're absolutely right, that it's enigmatic, in some way. I wrote a piece called "The Private Enigma in the Open Text". And maybe the "open text" is the enigma, really, in the private person, or the non-private person, the social sphere. The text is a curiously enigmatic function of our turning away from the world to think, in a certain way.

LP: I used that text in the Burroughs article, toward the end. My intention in the Burroughs piece... actually, there was no initial plan. I was curious about doing something which I did not begin *as* an intention. I didn't know what I was going to do, and yet I was going to do something within a mode that preeminently announces itself as knowing exactly what it's doing, that is, discourse. I, stubbornly enough, wanted to begin somewhere else. So I began with the comic books. I didn't want to force reasons out of the material, but in the course, one realizes all those usual directions. But that text, the discussion of the enigma, suddenly made at tremendous amount of sense. Because what I was clearly trying to do was to establish habitation —in difficult material, a lot of which exists at large. What you're saying does project outward, into the world, and, as you well know, raising the issue of war, it doesn't always allow itself to be enacted. That disturbs me, particularly in encountering so-called literary materials. "Enigma" came up very strongly as the suggestion of that fission and what it was that I was doing there in all that abstraction presumably coming out of not-at-all abstract materials, i.e., comic books... But another issue that interests me is that of lying fallow.

AD: "Lying Fallow" would be a great title for a piece actually, because of its duplicity, the duplicity in that term... lying. I was thinking when you were talking about war, that there's a kind of occasion between what we know war to be and the idea, "the death of the referent". It's odd we have to take textual discourse and subject it to the same tests or ask of it the same things that we would ask of political journalism, or whatever. What was the phrase that was used during the Vietnam campaign, to suppress with extreme...

LP: ... prejudice...

AD: ... prejudice, or something like that. So you take a phrase like that that wants to remain firm and masculine but not to say what's happened. In other words, we'll take the form out of it. We're just going to keep the condom, as it were. We find the same kind of phraseology, you know, functional in postmodern discourse, and so on, when they talk about things like the death of the referent. It's an absurd kind of wishful thinking, as if people are hoping that star wars will occur, only in the realm of a language, and that whatever shooting will occur from outer space, outer space being Paris for those of us in San Francisco or New York or at Yale... whatever shooting occurs from outer space, we hope, will somehow conveniently and quote enigmatically endquote confine itself to the realm of the language.

LP: Yes, I think a lot of postmodern critics and... I certainly see this in painting... there's a lot of mutual wish-fulfillment, the sense of having-already been blocked for some time.

AD: Yeah, I think it's like a circle jerk. I mean, there's no love. There's no affection. There's no contact with the world. There's not even particularly any contact, for the most part, with literature, which is writing in and about the world, and writing the world. So there's almost no contact with that. There's a level of that kind of discourse that's really as conveniently isolationist as possible. I see a large part of it as the willingness of the academy to perpetuate itself. That is, I think the

function of the academy's being threatened by the supremacy of economic institutions and by the fact that economics unilaterally, by which I mean, on a world scale, is overcoming the meaning of political institutions, and so on. Therefore, the academies that have been set up to furnish the political institutions with accepting ideologies no longer have that function, in a certain sense. So they're trying to function on a global level in the same way that the economies are succeeding in functioning globally, beyond the global level, obviously. I think the response that... not postmodernism... but recent trends in critical thinking, and so on, a large part of that critical work is a response to that kind of situation. The academy in the English Departments, in a certain sense, is trying to revolve so quickly that its place will be assured. It's as if they're trying to dig in, in some sense. But there's no longer any kind of ballast or, you know, it's just like a spinning node of discourse, or something. It's either going to become a black hole, or it is going to succeed in pushing the thumbtack firmly into the wall so that we have to keep learning the same things forever instead of unlearning the things that we should unlearn, like the death of the referent.

LP: Yes, that relates to what you're saying about currency, or what you said the other night about the text having that, or not, that is, currency, as a major problem. And clearly, one of the goals of the international economy is the *elimination* of currencies. Circulation won't be a problem.

AD: Right, wishful thinking... on the part of the computers.

LP: Yes, superconductivity is a terrific metaphor for that. And the necessary condition for that is the elimination of pluralism, to ensure that things are not-plural, to strictly delimit the canon... To turn to something else in this area... you seemed to undercut the idea, the other night, of use value. You have the phrase, "nostalgia for use value". That's realistic as a description, but do you see that as a final condition?

AD: I think that we're denied a nostalgia for it, really. Whether that's finally good or not, I don't really know, but it would be nice to prop up our sense of our position as writers or the valuation of the product of that activity with an idea like use. You know, "it's useful", in some way. I just don't think that we can. I don't know whether that's a function of, you know, nature, by which I mean things that go on, including political things and all that, or whether it's a function of ideation being beyond that, at the present moment. I'm not really sure which. But it's almost in the same way that the notion of the beautiful is no longer adequate, and I think that we're all somewhat comfortable with that now. To say, well, I've created this literary object, and it satisfies my sense and the sense of my peers and the sense of three or four teachers as being something that's beautiful, no longer guarantees satisfaction or a sense of completion or... we're no longer sufficiently exhausted by having created something just because it's beautiful. And I think the same kind of decay is occurring to the sense of valuation that might have once come from the idea of it's being useful or being propped up underneath itself by use. There's just too much pleasure that isn't useful and too much satisfaction that isn't derived from beauty. And I don't say that negatively. I'm not saying that there's too much

more than there should be. There's just a lot. So quantity of pleasure that's available, the quantity of satisfaction or the well-rounded and muscular happiness that can come from things that are neither useful nor beautiful, in a certain way, undermines the tower-like quality of those terms, either as towers that can support the activity of, say, art-making, or towers that can broadcast its effects.

LP: They seem now to be towers that mark a simple geographical fact, small enough. They seem, actually, to hold out a term. To do so tends to facilitate colonization, that is to say, ghettoization, not marginalization. That would be better, at this point. To really move out to the fringes that one almost now wishes did exist. That might suggest a possible end to this. But, in fact, what's worse is to be ghettoized within it, marked out and strictly de-valued.

AD: You mentioned canonization, and I always thought, perhaps, of writing something called "Canon Fodder".

LP: Right.

AD: I was at the beach last summer with Nick [Piombino] and Toni [Simon], and we were at a beach outside New York City on Long Island that's radio-free. So there's really no radios, so that unless you bring a newspaper or something, you're not going to be socially put-upon, if you go to that particular beach... except that airplanes fly by, dragging banners telling you where to go to listen to rock n' roll music that night, or what kind of suntan lotion to use.

LP: And you read them because there's nothing else to distract you...

AD: ...and there's nothing else. Yeah, I said to Nick, look, we thought we got away. *We thought* we got away. But here it is. I'm just saying that to underscore what you're saying about the fact that there *is no* margin. It's just not... there's no social margin. There just isn't. There are moments when there's a big lesion in the middle, like the peace movement, or something like that, or a big something that opens up and appears to have a margin because it inscribes one within itself, rather than outside itself, really. But there's no margin to be sought.

LP: How does this then, which leads for me into remembering the line, "So that's where people who use drugs are, sort of off to the side", how...

AD: What did I recognize? Well, I think there are a lot of ways of trying to be marginal in order to be important, whether it's a matter of self-marginalization, in order to feel that one's activity is important or that one is separate in some unique and useful and beautiful way, or unique or useful or beautiful way, or whether it's a group's effort to marginalize themselves and to be peculiarly stricken in some way. Lots of little religious groups have done that, have sought persecution, obviously, and *been* persecuted.

LP: Do you think that's a need that's characteristic, particularly, of the present, which seems remarkably to be such "explanatory times"? Information is now such a powerful icon, so that explanation is an addiction. In other words, even though the fact here is debilitating, that is, although I am powerless, nonetheless, if you take yourself out to a margin, then at least you've achieved the explanatory force your psyche apparently needs.

AD: I think it's always been an illusion of the avant-garde that it could write

that margin itself, and write it by writing, that it could somehow right it, and set it about, and turn it back, and so on. So there's always been that moment of enamoredness between the intelligently literate and some sense of political commitment, and so on. And I think it's a justified relationship. If you think, you have to think about your condition in the world, at some point. But that sense of it that the so-called avant-garde has often fostered for itself is just another form of self-aggrandizement. To be marginal in order to be important doesn't work, or in order to have an excuse for yelling, or in order to have a reason to complain, or in order to feel that you can look circumspectly in at the others. It just doesn't work for me. Because if there's no other, as I said, there's no margin, obviously, so we may as well survive to whatever extent we can, integrally, as individuals and as social groups, and so on. I'm not begging for compromise or for change or for reallocation, but just for an acceptance, so that we can wake up in the morning and participate, instead of waking up in the morning and looking to see where the margin has moved to overnight.

LP: Not at all to agree with you about whether there is or is not an 'other', because in a lot of ways, I see it as a utopic device. One wants to agree with your idea. But certainly marginalizing contributes to the objectification that prefers 'an other', as opposed to 'not-other', so that you get a very clear division of the subject and object... I'd like to ask about Duchamp, who seems to have been important to you for some time. Does he continue to be primary? Do you think about his work still?

AD: Not a lot. But I think, you know, it was refreshing to encounter somebody that was that smart and who really made new things and changed things. And also his passionate while quiet effort to disrupt everything that had been art before him couldn't help but be refreshing. And I found Beuys to be, although a little bit more programmatic and therefore problematic, similarly refreshing, in some ways. In other ways, his program was to do something entirely different and still have it accepted and noticed at the forefront of aesthetic and artistic activity. So the two of them I would put kind of together, in that way. I think Warhol did some things like that, but he did them almost too well, in a certain way. You know, Duchamp's... just his ability to make a gesture stand up and count by itself without furnishing it with a lot of additional background, or whatever, support, I found to be a refreshing thing. Or his ability to go away and work quietly for a long time and do something very well and leave it finished at the end of 15 years, say, or his ability to and interest in going to Monte Carlo and trying to find a way to beat the roulette racket, or something like that. So just his wacky business enterprises, selling Parisian air in New York City. It was refreshing, really.

LP: A relevant parallel would be the apparent unemployment that he endured or established at times during his career, not making work, or very carefully establishing the illusion of not making work. This is a very strong parallel with you. Because you've never stopped making work, even when you've been writing about the fact of not making work. What I was saying earlier about abstraction... it frames the act.

AD: It permits the obverse... I think it would be nice... maybe we could talk for a minute about trying to replace those towers utility and beauty. I mean, we already walked so far away from the truth and the other tower, whatever it might be, that we've almost agreed not to see them, or to wonder, certainly, where they are. So if you get rid of those towers as focal points on the horizon or around you or whatever, focal points on the margin perhaps, against which you try to locate your work and your activity, and then you also absolve yourself away from other powerful magnets, like the idea of beauty or utility, then what are you left with when you do the activity of writing or you make art, because there's obviously a sense of valuation implicit in much of what we want to tell ourselves about what we do. I don't think that that's a useful thing, frankly, which is why it's been easy for me to give up the idea of truth or utility or beauty or the other and survive without them. But I think there's... we're still struck, in some way, or I'm still, at the moment, at least, left with the feeling that I have to know when I'm writing and when I'm not. In other works, there's still within the activity an urge to create a margin, in some way. That strikes me as a kind of odd thing, actually.

LP: I don't see that as odd at all. I mean, you're asking me a question, so I'll answer it. It seems absolutely necessary. It would be absurd to deny boundaries. A margin is not a boundary. A margin implies that one is being put or is putting oneself there. And that simply pushes the boundary out a little further. There are lots of limits. To deny that means that you're in a position of making content only of your resistances, only of denial. A constantly negative activity. That doesn't seem as interesting.

AD: Why couldn't you be making material of your affirmations and assistances?

LP: But you see, in fact, I'm agreeing with you... with something you noted the other night. It's an absurd thing... it doesn't seem at all useful not to note that liminal crossing from not -writing to writing.

AD: The curious thing is... having given up the big hammers, the big signposts, and so on, and say, well, I'm not going to write relative to them, because they're things that have been out there for other cultural reasons. The idea of beauty is being used to sell things. The idea of utility is being used to make us work. The idea of truth is being used to make us behave, and the idea of the other is being used to permit us to kill. With reference to what things do we motivate our effort to work? For me, that becomes the question, kind of a pervasive question at the moment. The only answer I've found so far is that it's with reference to a maximum of permission. In other words, the more permission I give myself to write, the less bothered I'm going to be by either doing it or not doing it. Rather than a pre-valuation or a preordained schedule for activity or sensibility or imagination relative to myself and the world, instead of that, maybe I have to replace that with something as simple as recognition, which means something on the order of, oh, I have written. I wrote that. In other words, it's a kind of willful detritus.

LP: I'd like to address that. During the talk you said that the thinking is the thinking, and precedes, and that the writing then proceeds. How does that break

down? And are you now saying that there may have been this situation already existent and that it is a matter of recognizing, that the so-called writing is a recognition of what has already taken place?

AD: Well, I, for awhile, did writing formulated on that model, which is to say, a great deal of thinking took place. Then the writing could begin. And at that point, the writing was relatively effortless. I mean, it involved getting out certain emotional things that might have been difficult to deal with or dealing with some of the actual problems of executing. And I use that word advisedly. The idea is that it already occurred. So that in that case there was a real separation between the thinking activity and the writing activity, not a total separation but just seventy-thirty. So there's enough separation, as you said, to recognize a demarcation and to wonder what's going on. What I don't like about that is that it leaves the thinking part of the activity somewhat arid, because it's not producing results in the world. It's not giving birth or making love or making light or encouraging. It's nothing that you can give away, in a certain sense. And it leaves the writing activity somewhat arid and dry because it's then just a matter of filling up the shelf that's already been designed in the mind. My argument here is with people whose writing practice is largely and habitually formal, where there's a formal construct that becomes the idea, and the content fills that up sentence by sentence, or phrase by phrase, or word by word, or letter by letter, but somewhat willy-nilly in order to fill up a formal ideal. It's not satisfying to me to have these balloons around and then fill them up and then set them free. There's too much separation. It doesn't seem like a machine that works. So that was my argument with that way of proceeding, that it's just not adequately integrated. But if you give up that way of proceeding, or ways of proceeding that are modelled similarly, and say that we're going to permit writing activity that's a good deal less augmented, then you are left with the kinds of questions that you and I are raising, that is, relative to what do we recognize this augmentation? How do we privilege it, if at all? How do we *avoid* privileging it, let's say? How do we simply recognize it and say this is, in some way, activity that goes into a book. This is activity that goes into a love letter. This is activity that goes into conversation. This is activity that goes into farting, or voting. So I wanted to make, on another level, an argument for... if we're not going to separate the thinking from the writing in practice, then we're not going to separate either so-called writing practice, composed as it is of both writing and thinking and living and being and breathing, and all of that, from all of those other things. That's how I get to this idea that somehow the act of recognition is the only thing we can rely on and say, trust ourselves, and say, I wrote that, as opposed to I breathed that or I ate that.

LP: I think it complicates it. I think that what you're moving from is a purely static set of distortions...

AD: Yeah.

LP: You were talking about augmentation. I assume that's what you mean by augmentation...

AD: Yeah.

LP: ...that is, beauty, use, those icons. Now we've gotten a much more dynamic, therefore, remarkably more useful and beautiful and pleasurable augmentation, yet much more complex. Because, in some sense, the boundaries are much more numerous.

AD: Oh, they're everywhere.

LP: Yes, that's a terrific model, but what I was suggesting was... the thinking process itself, in some way, already accomplishes the writing, so that it's not simply a matter of transcription when you cross into the writing. What I'm saying is... that process establishes formally in conjunction with language and thinking the ground from which you will then exercise your facility. But you're then going to complicate the process by exercising this in collaboration with these other positions within the world. You can force that issue. You're going to force them to contribute to your ability to recognize and dynamize the text, within a much wider range of language. I'm saying that your ability to recognize will be promulgated from multiple positions within the world.

AD: Exactly, absolutely right, and not from the writing position.

LP: I'd like to bring out an aspect of this through an analogy I've been thinking of lately —that of, say, a complex piece of hardware, such as the Macintosh computer, with its relatively simpler software, and the much simpler, almost blank hardware of the PC clone, with its necessarily more complex, often multipledisk software. This applies as a parallel for me with something that you repeatedly brought up the other night —the Chinese poet. The situation in the T'ang Dynasty, for example, is the situation of the Macintosh —vastly complex hardware, so that the least gesture has enormous ability to make things link up— into the world. Whereas *your* situation, in the way we're talking about it now, seems analogous to the PC., i.e., zero degree culture. It's up to us to register differences and/or linkages. Vis-a-vis much so-called postmodern criticism, that is, contrary to it, I don't find that a bad situation at all. But it is very different. I think if we stopped being so self-consciously ironic about our necessity to erect ever more complex structures in order to build up a cultural fact and simply take it on and stop being guilt-ridden... That is, I think, to extend the analogy, you've gone to a very complex hardware in sex. Clearly, you get a great deal of resonance there. You can then gesture toward your sense of "direct language" and maintain that resonance. Now you're asking to go to the next stage —make the language operate outside of these, as you say, augmentations, and make that augmentation much more various and plural.

AD: Yeah, let the world be everywhere... and the text, too.

* * *

[Re-commencing]

AD: What an amazing machine. Really resists your... I mean it would tell you if you hadn't done it.

LP: I wish it would. It's survived, clearly, some big developments in technology...

(laughing)... truly an archivist... Again, I'd like to talk about the problem of style. There's almost a gluttonous anthropology, I think, that surrounds this whole issue. There is a propulsion to the new that seems to be one result of modernism —the nouveau. I'm wondering if you agree that that's a misreading of modernism. Because one of the facts of modernism was its location, its ability to locate in the actual act, its demand that that occur. The other important fact was the social necessity, the development into the avant garde, and hence, the nouveau. So that now we have an industry, the industry of style, with all the appropriate anthropologists dispensed to the field. I'm wondering if your use of paradox, or, conversely, tautology (and I'm wondering if you agree with that characterization), has something to do with... something like the enactment of wish-fulfillment. You come to my island to observe me... fine... I'll give you what you think you have come here for. I'm wondering about the willfulness.

AD: It's interesting to think about style because, you know, I've lived in New York for the last ten years, and New York for those ten years, and maybe twenty before that, at least, has been the locus of the daily meeting of the style whores and the style mongers. So there's no getting away from style and what it means and how it relates to fashion and saleability, the way *it*, more than discourse is permitted and encouraged to lubricate human intercourse and the kind of buying and selling we've come to accept as a substitute for real intercourse and discussion and content and occasion and experience, and so on. I mentioned the other day a sense that it's no longer commodities that we're buying and selling. What's being bought and sold now —and I mean this in a literal way— is the experience of buying and selling. What has exchange value now is the experience of exchange value, which makes it, to refer back again to what we were saying about postmodernism and the types of solipsistic criticism that surround it and are current with it, it makes those things seem not so surrounding when the act of being a consumer and being consumed mean exactly the same things, in terms of the war at home on poverty, and the war on poverty when everyone who is young and impoverished is sent to die in Viet Nam or Korea or wherever. So those kinds of solipsisms, actually, make the issue of style more poignant because we recognize that style is being used to sell us down the river or up the river or to ourselves or to the guy next door or whatever. So the issue of style is a very important one and to what extent we're going to permit it to survive and at what level, whether we want to siphon off something individual and let that be style, whether we have to go even below that and look for something idiosyncratic or even enigmatic in order to be satisfied that the type of style that we're positing and permitting is adequate to our experience, not too blown out of proportion, and so on. Or whether, on the other hand, we want to inflate a sense of style to some extent, and therefore, grasp at notions of community, or simply get involved in the process of creating community, denying our own individuality, to some extent, or feeling that we foster it by being part of the community, in order to inhabit and promote styles that we feel that, by virtue of their community origins, might be more extensive and more pervasive and more valued. So the issue of style is a very

important one because you can see along various continua and over various parts of the human landscape, that we could pick it up at any point almost, in other words, we can pick up permission for style at almost any level or every point. We can pick up information about style, whether we want to or not, and we pick up examples of style, whether we want to or not. So it's a matter of where we're going to plug in, and you mention, as examples of that, two things —tautology and, did you mention sarcasm?

LP: Paradox.

AD: Paradox, which is... sarcasm about the self... perhaps.

LP: Well, I had written down, paradox as the mutual wish-fulfillment of language and discord.

AD: I think tautologies are problematic. I was drawn to them at one time, because, reading Wittgenstein... it's frequently the endpoint of his discourse, or *an* endpoint... certainly in the *Tractatus*. Really the two types of things that he permits as knowledge, or that he sees to be adequate to some sense of knowledge are either tautologies or things that can be quote empirically verified endquote, whatever kind of faith it takes to believe in that. To criticize his thinking, at least at that point, on the one hand, he went for an easy truth, on an easy knowledge —tautology— so easy that it evaporates or implodes or just goes elsewhere without having had any effect *here*, say, and, on the other hand, he chose one that was very difficult, current at the time, in other philosophical thinkings, and because of the success of science. But I think that tautology, as a mode, is attractive, but very, very suspect. In other words, there has to be a term at the end of the equation or the facilitator or the sentence that is not at the beginning. Otherwise, there's no rush of meaning. Nothing has been grown. Nothing has been solidified that you can step on and stand on in order to make the next statement or assertion. So I think they're very... and writing that veers toward the tautological is equally suspect. For example, Jabes, who, if it's not tautological, it's a kind of tautological universe in which three functions or three words are always and habitually related the one to the other, the Book and the Nothing and the Page and the End of the... you know, it's like these few terms that just circulate so comfortably with one another that they become virtually tautological entities relative to one another, different terms, where the Word means, is valued as $2 + 2$, and Nothing is valued at 4.

LP: That is something I remarked in your reading last night. The thing I picked up most as a difference between your more recent work and *Name* is first, syntax... you don't use syntactical tropes, at least, not as prominently as in *Name*. Secondly, there seemed to be, largely, an absence of tautological gesture.

AD: Nor does it have anything to give. Now paradox was the other term that you raised, right? I think that paradox... I think language does have a life of its own. One doesn't want to personify it, but paradox, for instance, or punning, seem to be like two ways in which the language plays with itself, or whereby we can permit it to have fun with itself, and in another way, therefore, paradox is another end of the road. There's nothing beyond it. You have to turn back and come all the way back in order to inhabit other things. It's nice to have the quickness of the kind of

humor that paradox can imply, or permit. It's nice to have that kind of burst —of humor and of generosity and likeability. It's nice to be able to give that to people, frankly, but I would have to be suspicious of doing it through paradox, at least, other than examples of paradox that are just slightly gentle and playful. I had a line in the poem that I wrote for Tessie, "I look at our house, and I find it matchless, in an incendiary sort of way". So there's a slight, just a little... the language itched for a minute, or something. So that kind of... where you can do something that makes the physical surface of the language appear more immanent or more manifest... I enjoy that. But actual paradox seems, to me, to be another end term... a way of dragging it to a halt. And then you'd have to pick up again and start all over again, having lost everything that you had carried that far.

LP: Which would be demonstration of impatience with either language or the world or the project at hand.

AD: Yes, loss of content. It's nicer to carry out gesture after gesture, as many as you can link together and make sense of as a unit, or as a sequence of gestures, and let them all survive, rather than bringing any one of them to an end, and again, it's that similar... or relates to the critique that I made of the thinking preceding the writing and the writing following the thinking, where you imagine the gestures that you're going to carry out, and then carry them out. So that they tend to have a type of identity, or something, whether that identity is stanzaic and formal in that way, or whether it's a particular kind of sentence that repeats itself over and over again, and is formulaic in that way. I don't find those formulas satisfying, simply because they are formulas, and therefore, constructs, and as constructs, they have to be ego-constructs. I don't see them in the world, in that way. I think there's a good deal more variety, and so on.

LP: It strikes me that style, as we were speaking of it earlier, is the body making war upon itself. I see that in style as a value.

AD: Yes, it's a self-inflicted glory.

LP: Again, how would you situate syntax?

AD: Syntax seems to be, in a way, something that occurs as grammar moves toward style. In other words, syntax has personal connotations and personal meanings, whereas grammar does not, at least, in certain ways. So partly along some sort of discontinuous continuum between grammar and style we encounter syntax, which is humanly motivated, personally motivated, site-specific, time-specific, habitual, and something that we are eager about.

LP: Why are we eager about it?

AD: I think that it's particularly difficult for any individual to separate themselves from how they want to be perceived, and syntax is seen as it is (laughs), as a main mover toward the ir-resolution of the self and the erection of the image of the self, the assumed or projected quote adequate endquote image of the self that we want and set about constructing. So that syntax in that way is peculiarly suspect because, unlike style, which is so far out there, so obvious and so blatant in its machinations, in the way it affects us and moves us and does us and undoes

us, and so on, our rather easy addictions to little aspects of it... syntax seems more... much closer to what we are, which it is.

LP: That is, in process.

AD: I think so, and centered in us and us in it, with grammar somehow behind us, something that we learn and manipulate, not that it isn't still a living organism, and so on. Any model is going to be a little arbitrary...

LP: It makes possible.

AD: So we see grammar back there as this set of simple methods, of tools, and style out there as its elaboration through quantities of individuals, in order to control them and inhabit them and gesture for them and deny them.

LP: Yes, it will always be the function of style to *deny* that grammar actually made it possible. It will claim certain inherent qualities in what it is vis-a-vis grammar, not that grammar *made* it possible.

AD: Whereas syntax is something that it's hard to divest ourselves of, because it is us in some way. It appears to be 'us'. It's the gesture that we make when we get up in the morning. In that way, it has to be inhabited and critiqued in a really personal way. I wouldn't be prone to say anything judgmental about it, except where I see —and it is possible to see cases where a person is pushing the syntax towards a style, which would be one way of putting it, or trying to sap something out of it and return it to a grammar. In those cases, all you can really say is that they're not permitting themselves to flourish and live in that instance and through that medium and through that process, because they're trying to push it out beyond and make it sellable and acceptable to everyone else, something they can hide behind and that others will see when they look towards them. Or they're pushing it behind them so that they themselves become somewhat transparent and the style moves back and becomes a little bit skeleton-like or ghost-like, a little bit more frail, a little emptier, like a grammar, say, a little less personalized. So I think it has to be an individually arrived-at set of solutions that permits anyone to maintain a syntax or to see their own syntax change, as far as what's adequate to express the things they want to express or be what they want to be. Do you think that that's adequate? Because those terms are so... that's one way of placing them —style, syntax, grammar— and then fashion being style smeared over a period of time...

LP: Fashion's the industry going beyond all of these terms. Fashion...

AD: ...somebody's job. (laughs).

LP: No, I think it's very adequate as a characterization, but also tremendously optimistic. I'd like to turn to Spicer, since we talked of him earlier. In fact, I'm surprised, in retrospect, that you didn't mention him in the talk. The commonality seems obvious —the directness of language, for example, or Spicer's contention that Creeley's "following the dictates of language" was nonsense.

AD: Well, yes, the object does seem to be to get the poem *out of* the language and into the world, in some way, to the extent that they are separate. And I'm not going to argue that at any great... I mean, they're co-extensive, in some way. When we think about them, of course, they're both abstract thought objects in the mind, which makes it difficult to do anything with them by thinking about them, and by

'them' I mean language and the world. But to the extent that they are separate, we want to get the poem out of the language, or out of the furnished room, to use Spicer's example, and into the world. As far as his notion that the ideas come from elsewhere, either radiologically, or whatever, I don't know. I think, you know, that he was trained as a linguist and saw the language even more as a particular site than you or I might, in spite of our ability to abstract and then see it, as a site to some extent, or as a locus of a certain type of activity. He may have done that even more and therefore, the quality of intent or the quality of meaning generation or just generative qualities connected with the feeling of writing, he may have had to explain with a slightly more strained or tenuous notion, you know?

LP: So that you're saying that because the language was so highly objectified, in his idea of it, anything that registered in that, therefore had to be 'other' than that.

AD: Right. Came from somewhere quite other. It's not really generative. I mean, the furniture in the room is not generative. It's something you inhabit moment to moment, and, therefore, there has to be something really quite remarkably other that impels you to sit in *that* chair. (laughs) Or to select *that* orange, or, particularly, to call that orange ovoid. I mean, there must be something really weird going on to make you do that, and it must come from really somewhere other. I think that was probably part of his argument with Creeley, and one that, in a way, he might have lost. I mean, in Creeley's language, certainly, you know, the language is highly developed as an organism and quite flexible and deliberate and much of what comes out comes right out of that organism, at the same time... certainly the intensity of the voice and the breaking of the voice at the end of the lines. But there's a real integration, to that extent, something that I've always liked about it, and not that I would fault Spicer against that, but I can just see how they might have felt it differently.

LP: Again, your idea of complicating the language, getting it out amongst multiple totems, not making a claim for it 'not being distorted', i.e., not static, but making it as complex and as able to register difference as it can be. I think you're right, that Creeley did have such a notion of language. Spicer's model of language does, in fact, appear to be 'thing language', almost dead.

AD: But then syntax, I think, is a very important, a very significant area of the practice and pragmatics of writing and living to look at, I think, compared to the others, much more significant than how much a person knows about grammar, or how much they're unwilling to be debilitated by ambient styles. Really it's a matter of syntax, because that's looking at your own mind in operation as a language implement, and tool implementer.

LP: Yes, but it seems to me that in the talk the other night, grammar was the base, that Stein, in some way, had enabled you to enunciate a method. This was what enabled the non-grammatical presentation the other night. In other words, there was not a sense of A is, B is, and C is, but of a sensuous and subtle imbrication of different kinds of ideas. But grammar stood behind all of that, in the

ability to run out a sentence and have one's appetite for a sentence satisfied by the period.

AD: It was interesting to talk about Royet-Journoud in the car, about that kind of gesture, which seems to be peculiarly French at the moment. Writing is being done there that has a superficial kind of appeal because it... I guess it relates to Mallarme, in particular, to *Un Coup de Des*, and also it relates to some of his notebooks, where with even greater abstracted distance between notion and notion... Things are still sketched and left in relation to one another. I think obviously those things could have functioned for him in order to generate works and thoughts and emotions and memories. It was probably a useful antidote to obsolescence for Mr. Mallarme. But then to find that kind of form being set forth as a method of operation is another matter. And I just use Royet-Journoud as an example. I see Anne-Marie Albiach as a similar type of thing, and some of our own colleagues writing in similar ways... nobody doing it exactly as well as they do. Craig Watson writes at times in ways like that. I just read his recent book. I can't remember the name, but it was similar... you know, word clusters here, word clusters there, and so on. And they cohered internal to one another in a certain way, and they're somehow putting forth the argument that you, the reader, should somehow be smart enough to get it, in some way. On the other hand, I think the information just isn't there, and the content isn't there. The *necessity* to get it is not there. In other words, it's like saying you should be able to survive on a diet of water and air. Here's the water here, and here's the air. Surely you're smart enough to get from one to the other and keep going back and forth until you're satisfied. But there's nothing there to satisfy. So the argument is that the reading experience itself is adequate, but the reading experience without something to read is not adequate. That again is just recapitulating my argument against the hierarchy critics at Yale.

LP: Again, it does *not* problematize the issue of context. It just assumes the text is somehow sufficient. It *might be*, if we had a very different context. But given the advanced state of the disease, the assumption continually being made is that the doctor's right.

AD: Well, the doctor's gotta be right, because the patient is dead. And they the happy morticians have a job to do.