

## GUIDE TO KULCHUR

Benjamin Friedlander

Bob Perelman's *Primer* (This, 1981) brought Perelman's early work to a pointedly mannered culmination. Concise, witty, allusive to a wide range of literary works, heavily dependent on stark, imagistic metaphors (all the while railing against these very qualities), the poems in *Primer* were neo-classical in the time-honored sense of Pound's Confucian dictum, "MAKE IT NEW". Perelman's next collection, *To the Reader* (Tuumba #49, 1984), announced a marked change in direction. This change was twofold; firstly, the range of cultural and current-event reference in the later book was much broader than Perelman had theretofore attempted; secondly, his interest in this material was explicitly political. A burlesque of public discourse, *To the Reader's* thesis was that war, commerce, and patriarchy are the products of a furiously misspent sexuality:

Picture (see, control, dominate) a  
Phallocentric lawyer dominating a Snickers, Milky  
Way or Mars Bar  
On Market Street in the spermy light  
Of day. "I couldn't care less"  
I'm not going to get off his case  
Until the subject, a 10 foot tall ogre  
Sitting at the conference table, changes nature.  
Unknowable, domineering, ravening, question-begging,  
life-  
Destroying, tune-mongering calliope...

Given objects of scorn, Perelman's wit had become an enraged irony, an assault on sensibility bringing to light a social code both puritanical and vulgar. And though the politics may have been received, not to mention uncharitable, the force of the writing was undeniable, a suitably Brechtian expose of the grosser excesses of bourgeois life.

*To the Reader* questioned the legitimacy of the irrationally rulebound society that defines and maintains our culture, but implicitly privileged culture's "top end", if only by leaving art out of the attack. Happily, Perelman's newest collection, *The First World*, makes this contradiction its central theme. To wit, a head-on confrontation with "The Art Machine" —Duchamp, Bach, literary theory, Sophocles,

even Pinocchio— everything that smooths over the brutal acts of what Allen Ginsberg once called (misogynistically, but with psycho-sexual implications similar to those emphasized in Perelman’s work) “the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar”. Unlike *To the Reader*, *The First World* proclaims complicity, singing in its chains like the sea:

The fact that this  
 didn’t exist a minute ago...  
 as I stare back  
 at my hand  
 Slave if the master narrative, master  
 of the slave phrase, hearing  
 in burst instants, the semi-breakable  
 containers, intimate noises.

The ending there, echoing the big bang to come even as it conveys the fragility of human life, gives marvelous expression to something that Lucy Lippard has also noted recently, namely that “artists seeking immortality in the nuclear age must confront the notion that there may be no posterity”.<sup>1</sup> Yet the overall impression here is of hopelessness, with the clever inside/outside use of the word “master” describing an escape-proof powerlessness.

It’s a commonplace to say private desires and public acts are inextricably related. Perelman takes this a step further by asserting that art, which embodies this relation, is as debased as the society that produces it. Art appreciation, then, makes us partners in a crime:

At present the Miracle-Anus of the Central Core  
 is shitting bricks of slaves matted with plans  
 for medical complexes, which is where the sick people  
 should go  
 and die if need be, to keep the plot lines pure  
 thus cutting off misreading at the source.

In *The First World*, everything, no matter how horrible or sublime, becomes a pop cultural fact. Thus, the arm’s race is a “ratings war with Russia” and Afghanistan, “that solemn trysting place of the advanced ascetic journalist”. Language itself Perelman refers to as “that’s ports page of being”.

Perelman is funniest when taking on the entertainment industry, most poignant when discussing writing or literature. In “Cliff Notes”, the book’s first poem, he blames all human suffering on t.v. and then remembers, “It can’t be the knob’s fault because this is back before knobs”. In “Let’s Say”, on the other hand, the book, personified, and the person, objectified, become nearly indistinguishable. The result is one of *The First World’s* few moments of empathy:

A page is being beaten  
back across the face of "things".  
Inside me there's a little book of no color, its  
pages riffing as I  
breathe, a moving point,  
torn out

Whether these are more than postmodernist tropes, however, depends on whether the point is an engagement or a critique of experience, and where one stands politically. Is the brutal commodification of man by a democratic capitalism *intriguing notion* or *present danger*? Lines like Perelman's are tenable only if sincere.

*The First World* is primarily a criticism of the present but here and there it does track back with thudding step through time to lay blame and name the culprits. As in Pound's work, which holds strange fascination for Perelman, there is an attempt to use emblematic shards of history —Plato, Sophocles, Athenian democracy, Roman Imperialism— as occasions for political oratory. But where Pound's reverence for beauty and attention to detail tempers the castigating tone, Perelman is simple vehement:

At its premiere, history was received poorly.  
Catharsis was a slap in the face  
as the spectators watched themselves  
being measured, killed, inflamed, conscripted, armed  
to the teeth inventoried,  
invented, in a word  
loaded onto the train.

For Pound, history meant the *paideuma*, "the active element in the era, the complex of ideas which is in a given time germinal, reaching into the next epoch, but conditioning all the thought and action of its time".<sup>2</sup> For Perelman, history is the past of a problem that has gotten way out of hand. The comparison may seem glib, or based on an absurd reduction, but it's exactly the point at which Perelman himself takes Pound to task. "((T)) he continual paradox for Pound", says Perelman, "is why, if the Good has such strength and authority, it doesn't rule completely... History ((i.e., the record of acts, not the paideuma))... has to be an anomaly for Pound, which helps explain why his treatment of it is so anecdotal and disjunctive".<sup>3</sup> In other words, history should have disabused Pound of his reverence for art.

Perelman's argument with Pound is but one aspect of a larger disagreement with civilization itself, the formal consequence of which *The First World* makes readily apparent. Gone are the classical virtues of Perelman's early work. A purposely overblown rhetoric now dominates —Perelman himself refers to one poem as "doggerel". More than that, some of these poems seem to stray from the point, often opening parentheses without closing them; others lapse into prose as

though rebelling against the unseemly orderliness even free verse requires. Yet I hesitate to say that Perelman is embracing an “anti-aesthetic” or writing “anti-art”. Dada gestures and the like are attempts to take art outside the bounds of decency; *The First World* situates itself squarely within the bounds of bourgeois indecency. Moreover, the mixed metaphors and other “imperfections” that crop up throughout quite obviously serve the purposes of the argument —with a writer as technically capable as Perelman, “looseness” would seem to function as a sign of anxiousness and anger, i.e., sincerity, feigned or real one cannot tell.

The closest parallel I can think of to Perelman’s recent work is Edward Dorn’s *Hello La Jolla*. There, Dorn adopted the slick style of an A.M. disc jockey and used it to launch an attack on the rapidity and hypocrisy of life in Southern California. Another precedent would be Bertolt Brecht, who wrote some 50 years ago of his opera *Mahagonny*, “*its content is pleasure*”:

Fun, in other words, not only as form but as subject-matter. At least, enjoyment was meant to be the object of inquiry even if the inquiry was intended to be an object of enjoyment. Enjoyment here appears in its current historical role: as merchandise.<sup>4</sup>

For Brecht, opera was a “culinary” form, its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool compromised by the very fantasy elements that had secured its popularity. Brecht’s solution was ruthlessness. And in ruthlessness, Perelman too has found some answers.

**Notes:**

1. Lucy Lippard, “First Strike for Peace” in *Heresies* #20, 1985.
2. Ezra Pound, “For a New Paideuma” in *Selected Prose 1909-1965*.
3. Bob Perelman, “Good & Bad/Good & Evil: Pound, Celine and Fascism” in *Poetics Journal* #6, 1986.
4. Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theater is an Epic Theater” in *Brecht on Theater*.

Two recent collections by Perelman, *Face Value* (Roof, 1988) and *Captive Audience* (The Figures, 1988), continue the work begun in *The First World* and *To the Reader*.