



A great black and yellow W-2 rocket,  
46 feet long, stands in an empty desert.

Depending on who is the host of the  
Benny Hill Show.

These lines present certain obvious challenges to the reader. First, how did this rocket get here? Such information is not available either to a reader or a desert traveller. It's interesting that our ignorance of these matters is often more painful to us when we confront it in a poem than when we do so on the road. We want to know why a rocket suddenly appears in our text (desert). It's a question Watten's elliptical style succeeds in raising. Second, how does military hardware relate to an entertainment such as the Benny Hill Show? Does one distract us from the other? The absence of narrative prevents that from happening here. Perhaps what connects these stanzas is that in each of them identity wobbles. A "W-2" is more often a tax form than a rocket; Benny Hill may or may not be the host of his own show. The problem of finding some way to integrate these things is exactly that—a problem raised with an urgency uncharacteristic of deconstruction. In fact, Watten may have in mind what's often identified as the apolitical character of deconstruction when he writes in "Conduit",

Then comes  
the attack.

Why it does not disturb us is an infinite  
regression in which nothing is at stake.

Such a linear regression would occur if, as Derrida has written, "There is no outside of the text". The possibility of an exit from "the text" is something I'm not prepared to comment on, but I know that Watten's book, *Conduit*, is full of exit signs. The poem, "Direct Address", names many real persons, living and dead, to remind the reader of history in progress. Often, he combines the names of literary figures with reference to modern technology, i.e.

Mallarmé's perfection of package design.

Or,

Lautréamont and Rimbaud miss trains.

Watten's overall strategy seems to be to create as much friction as possible, both within and between lines, in order to make this book mimetic of the contradictions of ongoing history.

Bob Perelman's new book, *Face Value*, attempts to demystify the workings of ideology in our culture, especially in the mass media. It's difficult to imagine why



historical, temporal fact rather than a priori postulate. “At the time I thought nothing of it” is a sentence that implies the necessity for change so that the subject can avoid being “asleep, but voting”. It should be clear that this is not only a description of the current political situation, but a condemnation of it. Perelman’s writing is oppositional whereas, as Peter Daws notes in *Logics of Disintegration*, “...deconstruction... has been accused of undermining the possibility of rational opposition to existing institutions, and therefore of accomodating, even if indirectly, to the status quo”.

In fact, the dissimilarities between these “language poems” and what is suggested by Derrida et al. are so great that I wonder how the assumption of their relatedness could have gained currency. The question for language poets is not whether it is of value to be a “literary practitioner of desconstruction”. That is not what they intend. Watten, for instance, seems to want to constuct a paradigm of social conflict, while Perelman aims for a satiric demystification of culture. A better question would be whether they *can* “revive” —to quote Watten— any part of the world by writing works which put things not only in doubt, but “at stake”.