

# INSIDE/OUTSIDE: POETS IN THE ACADEMY\*

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## ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the relationship between editing and teaching, from his own experience as editor which has given him the skills he needs to teach writing. What makes edition work is something both lasting and ephemeral —something that reflects and shapes the period, but that goes beyond the concerns of the period. It is built architecturally, of substantial and fragile design

KEY WORDS: American poetry, edition, *o-blek*, writing, teaching, inside/outside.

## RESUMEN

El autor analiza la relación entre editar y enseñar desde la perspectiva de editor y que le ha proporcionado las habilidades necesarias para enseñar a escribir. Lo que hace que la edición funcione es algo duradero y efímero —eso que refleja y forma el momento pero que va más allá de los intereses del propio momento. Se construye arquitectónicamente a base de un diseño sustancial y frágil.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía americana, edición, *o-blek*, escritura, enseñanza, dentro/fuera.

The inside/outside is a curious construction. In terms of aesthetics, it makes me think of Stevens' force of the imagination pushing against the force of reality. Or Nietzsche's reading of the Apollonian and Dionysian. Also Robin Blaser's discussion of Jack Spicer's "practice of outside" resonates here for me. The idea of exposing a real.

But in relation to institutions, are we *ever* outside them? I know that in the mid to late 80's when I was waiting tables and reading books and editing my journal *o-blek* I felt freer than I do now, but then my employment took up less of my mental and psychic time.<sup>1</sup> But even then, outside of the quote academy, writing poems and editing my journal, I was already always working within a political institution. As Chomsky reminds us, the American "language is a dialect that has an army and a navy." So the political reality of working in language is unavoidable. We are never outside it.

I am always reminding my students that language is older than us, bigger than us, and it doesn't live inside us; we live inside it.

The inside and outside I think we deal with most is in relation to the work itself, the difficulty of getting inside our work, given the cognitive dissonance of daily life under the rule of the worst president in our history. I can only imagine that the disturbance between reality and its official spin has never been greater —when even the concept of free speech, so fundamental to our work, is called into question, overturned, assaulted.

Not to sound naive but since we're here in the land of Lincoln, I thought I might at least mention Abraham Lincoln. I've been reading about and rereading a lot of Lincoln these days to remind myself what liberty sounds like in the highest office in the government.

Rather than thinking in terms of inside & outside, I tend to think of all our work as occurring within a field. A field is a ground. And even though the word seems to suggest openness and freedom, the field is haunted.

In 1863 when Lincoln made his dedicatory remarks at Gettysburg, that field in southern Pennsylvania was first open land, then a homestead and a farm, then a battlefield where 50,000 fell in 3 days, then a graveyard, and now it is a national park surrounded by shopping malls and Jacuzzi motels.

Out of the 18 definitions of field, a third of them have to do with war.

A field is the ground on which a battle is fought.

A scene of military operations.

The battle itself.

The order of battle.

An area of operation.

A temporary work or fortification thrown up by troops operating in the field.

But a field is also an extended surface, a liberating expanse.

The surface on which something is portrayed.

The groundwork of a picture.

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\* AWP Panel, Chicago, March 2004.

<sup>1</sup> I remember in 1981 the first time I saw the reissue of Wyndham Lewis's "Review of the Great English Vortex," *BLAST*. I was 21, walking home, sweaty, exhausted, and alive with the noise of the city after a Pere Ubu concert at Irving Plaza. In the window of St. Mark's Bookshop I saw a fluorescent pink volume with the word *BLAST* in gigantic bold sans-serif type printed diagonally across the cover. The Sex Pistols had nothing on this. I had moved to New York in part to check out the punk/new music scene of the late 70's early 80's and to go to college. Before college, in my late teens, I took a few years off and worked in a factory winding resin tubes and in a residential treatment center working with emotionally disturbed adolescents. When I did overnights at the center I would stay up late reading the then-new *Collected Oppen* as well as H.D., Stevens, Williams, Lorca, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and almost anything published by Burning Deck. So when I saw the *BLAST* in shocking pink and read the manifestos, I was home in that synthesis —Punk and Poetry had merged and I knew at once I wanted to edit my own journal and so I did.

A scope or opportunity.  
A space where games are played.

The word ‘Field’ is prefixed to the names of animals, often in the sense of “wild.”

In the face of current events, I find myself caught between the seeming irrelevance of what I do and an insistence that what I do has value. And by “what I do” I mean writing poetry, editing, and teaching. As far as coming into the academy goes, I kind of backed into it. My writing of poetry was something I had done for years that had nothing to do with academic affiliation or instruction—and to a certain extent that’s still true. But in 1991 I had an editing project that I had committed myself to, which was the editing of Jack Spicer’s lectures, and I came to realize that I could do this work at SUNY Buffalo with the support of Robert Creeley, Charles Bernstein, and Susan Howe, and with the financial support (meager as it was) that working within an institution offered.

I see a relationship between editing and teaching, the sense of reading in a plural way, to listen and respond, to be willing to find what is and isn’t working in a given piece of writing and what suggestions might help to allow it to become itself. So I feel that being an editor—particularly the 8 years I spent editing my little magazine, *o.blek*—gave me the skills I needed to teach writing.

In relation to editing, it’s interesting to look back at the history of the “little magazine” as we can see they began to flourish in and around World War I. Currently I’m teaching a course on the New York School and we’re just about to hit the mimeo revolution of the 60’s, which took place during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the Viet Nam War. I guess I’m thinking about the importance of resistance and the history of the voice.

The field we work is a battlefield and at times a garden, the realm of overlooked poets rescued from their apartments, from well-meaning librarians, and from landfill. Writing, editing, and teaching are all ways of working the field, making use of what we see and what we know, reshaping it, making others a part of it.

Like writing, editing and teaching are fundamentally about composing a world. The writers one reads inhabit one’s life, haunt one’s imagination, daily walks, conversations with friends, dreams. They give one coverage in the world, a sense of place, a shared tradition. In editing one argues for that constituency. Emily Dickinson wrote “The Soul selects her own Society.” In editing, or in putting together a class, one selects the culture one wants to endure.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Maybe this is why so many great editors are also great writers. I think of Pound’s indefatigable editorial input to various journals and anthologies, Marianne Moore at *The Dial*, T.S. Eliot at Faber & Faber, Ford Madox Ford’s *The English Review*, Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Les Soirées de Paris*, Robert Creeley’s *The Black Mountain Review*, John Ashbery’s *Art and Literature*, Ted Berrigan’s *C*, Jack Spicer’s *J*, Diane di Prima and the then Leroy Jones’s *Floating Bear*, Keith & Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Burning Deck*, Nathaniel Mackey’s *Hambone*, etc., to name just a few. Within this rich tradition

I can't write all the time, so teaching and editing give me other ways to compose. It can be a relief because unlike the mostly lonely and bewildering process of writing a poem, teaching has an immediate presence in the world. And it's another way to participate and feel effective and to learn something. It's social. I feel like I'm constantly rehearsing the field all the time, living in my bibliography, as it were. Even on the days I don't want to leave my house to go to school, I can always count on the power of the writing of the women and men who haunt my classroom. Their work never fails me.

A field is an expanse. It is a ground of operation and observation, action and investigation, the space where one obtains one's food.

In the case of editing a journal, what makes it work is something both lasting and ephemeral—something that reflects and shapes the period, but that goes beyond the concerns of the period. It is built architecturally, of substantial and fragile design. One has to maintain the delicate play between aesthetic consistency and openness. It is interesting to look at Pound's advice to the young Robert Creeley, as it begins by discussing the way verse operates and how one composes a magazine in very much the same way; that is, journals work like poems. Creeley recounts that Pound "proposed that verse consisted of a constant and a variant, and then told me to think from that to the context of a magazine."

I feel that working within a classroom is just another way of furthering the impulse that initially led me to editing, that is, a reconciliation of real and imaginary worlds as a vital means to articulate and shape the present.

Having begun these notes with Lincoln at Gettysburg and writing this while Bush and his Lockheed administration are about to hijack yet another election and perpetrate their economic and political war of the worlds. I return to Pound's comment about verse being composed of a constant and a variant, and I can't help but think that war is the constant and we are the variant, that the survival of culture is a function of how we read and what we compose, that these are the real issues.