form, have been published, elsewhere: The section on Steve McCaffery's "Lag" in chapter 4, in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, ed. Anthony Easthope and John Thompson (New York: Simon & Schuster; Brighton: Harvester, 1991); the section on John Cage's *Roaratorio* in chapter 5, in *Postmodern Genres*, ed. Marjorie Perloff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989); the section on Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* in chapter 5 in *Denver Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Spring 1991); a short version of the section on John Ashbery's "Business Personals" in chapter 6, in *Verse* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1991); the section on John Cage's *I–VI* in chapter 7, in *Parnassus* 16, no. 2 (1991). I am grateful to the editors of these books and journals for their early support and advice.

My editor at Chicago, Alan Thomas, with whom I was also fortunate to work on *The Futurist Moment*, is not just a fine editor: he is a superb and often sardonic reader, who won't let the author get away with anything. I am also grateful to have once again had the help of Jean Eckenfels with the manuscript.

As always, my family has participated actively in the project. I have drawn on Nancy Perloff's expertise in twentieth-century art and music movements and Carey Perloff's knowledge of the period's theatrical language, particularly that of Beckett and Pinter. Most of the reproductions in this book were made at the UCLA Medical Center photography lab, thanks to my husband, Joseph Perloff, who incidentally also tried to teach me about chaos theory.

This book is dedicated to my granddaughter Alexandra Perloff-Giles, who won't read it, at least not in the near future since she just celebrated her first birthday, but who will grow up to recognize the "new" textual world here described as quite simply the norm.

Stanford and Pacific Palisades, 1990

Marjorie Perloff

---

1   *Avant-Garde or Endgame?*

There is constant surprise at the new tricks language plays on us when we get into a new field.
—Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations* (1938)[1]

CompuServe—the electronic information service that allows anyone who owns a computer with a modem and the requisite software to become a member, thus gaining access to a Garden of Earthly Delights that includes the Associated Press wire service, Standard & Poor's, a shopping mall where one can buy Godiva chocolates, Crabtree & Evelyn soaps, or Brooks Brothers suits, and the EAASY SABRE desk, which provides flight information and makes airline reservations—has a monthly magazine with feature articles like "Designs on Success," "New Vendors Flock to Forums," and "Fly the Frugal Skies." Lest *CompuServe Magazine* be thought hopelessly crass, concerned with nothing but consumerism, it also boasts a series of Credos, the first and most important being the "Computing Services Credo,"[2] which goes like this:

> For those who call out for advice,
> answers, even mere companionship,
> in a discomfiting computer world,
> we throw you the online rope that
> connects to the main. No man is
> an island unto himself. Herein the
> Control-G tolls for thee.

Here, lineated as a poem, with justified left and right margins and the foreshortened last line centered below, is a rather remarkable variant of a text most of us know, at least in part, not so much from its source, John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), but probably from Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (the movie version of which stars Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman), or, if not from Hemingway, from the countless novels, TV shows, greeting cards, and newspaper articles, in which the phrases "no man is an island," and "for whom the bell tolls" are regularly recycled with portentous urgency. What Donne actually wrote was this:

> No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were; any mans *death* diminishes *me*, be-

cause I am involved in *Mankinde*; and therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.[3]

"Every man is a peece of the *Continent*": in Computing Services Credo terms, this means that in a "discomfiting computer world," all of us can now hook into "the *maine*," that is, "the main" CompuServe center by using a computer code or an 800 number, a number which has neatly replaced the "*Mannor* of thy *friends*" as a source of "companionship." In this strange new computer world, to be "involved in *Mankinde*" means, not that one participates in the joys and griefs of others and involves oneself in their lives (and hence deaths), but that one belongs to the right program network, so that, in times of trouble, one can be thrown "the online rope." Hence "No man is an island unto himself" (note the pronoun shift from the original), not because Death is the great leveler, but, on the contrary, because life, if we can call it that, is available at the mere touch of the Control-G button, whence comes the "advice" and "companionship" of a message on the computer screen. A lifeline in the form of an "online rope," appropriately designated as a "Control."

If *CompuServe Magazine* serves up bits and pieces of garbled John Donne, our own poets and artists are now responding, consciously or not, to these media messages—whether on video or FAX or in the print media—which, try as we may to avoid them, now permeate our verbal as well as our visual and acoustic space. As I write this, for example, I am wondering whether to check the INBOX of my modem MCI-Mail system to see if there are any messages from the editors of ⟨*Postmodern Culture*⟩, the new electronic "international and interdisciplinary forum for discussions of contemporary literature, theory, and culture," published at North Carolina State University, on whose editorial board I serve.[4] If there is such a message in the INBOX, I can then respond by typing "pmc@ncsuvm.ncsu.edu," and use the CREATE command to make my own message, which will be instantly relayed to North Carolina, three thousand miles away from Los Angeles, where I live, as well as three hours later. The ease and convenience of such speedy communication is breathtaking, and yet there is something quite terrifying about electronic mail, whose appearance in standard screen format makes even the telephone seem warm and sensuous, the repository of what is, after all, a human voice, even if that voice is itself increasingly pre-recorded, whether on the answering machine or in telephone advertising campaigns.

The impact of electronic technology on our lives is now the object of intense study, but what remains obscure is the role, if any, this technol-

ogy has in shaping the ostensibly private language of poetry. Current thinking is sharply divided on this question but few of the answers are optimistic. Perhaps the most common response to what has been called the digital revolution[5] has been simple rejection, the will, we might say, *not to change*, no matter how "different" the world out there seems to be. In recent years, for example, a movement has emerged that calls itself the New Formalism, or sometimes the New Narrative or Expansive poetry.[6] The main thrust of New Formalist poetics, as Frederick Feirstein and Frederick Turner explain in their Introduction to a collection of New Formalist manifestos, is to move "beyond the short free verse autobiographical lyric" of the present, returning poetry to meter (which is almost invariably equated with iambic pentameter) and narrative.[7] The "successful" narrative poem, writes Robert McDowell, should have "a beginning, a middle, and an end," its time frame should be "compressed," its characters should be "memorable" in being "consistent" ("an act must logically follow acts preceding it"), its locale specific and "identifiable," and its subject "compelling" (FF 105–6). E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers—these are New Formalist heroes, with the lofty Englit tradition (Milton to Wordsworth and Arnold) squarely behind these "robinets."

No doubt, the New Formalists do have a genuine grievance against the dominant lyric mode of the seventies and eighties, with its repetitive dwelling on delicate insight and "sensitive" response, its nostalgia for the "natural," and its excessive reliance on simulated speech and breath pause as determinants of line breaks and verse structure.[8] But the real issue is not whether to write in free verse or iambic pentameter, anymore than it is whether to foreground the lyric self or to have that self tell a "compelling" story. More properly put, the question would be: given the particular options (and nonoptions) of writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, what significant role can poetic language play? "The whole purpose of a lyric poem," writes Frederick Feirstein, "is to sing: to sing in a natural, not puffed up, way so that one can reach an audience" (FF xi). But what is a "natural" as opposed to a "puffed up" way of singing that will reach "an audience" accustomed to VCRs, FAX machines, Walkmans, laser printers, cellular phones, answering machines, computer games, and video terminals? And why should lyric be "natural" rather than artificial? Did Donne's lyric "sing" in a natural way? Or Pope's? What, for that matter, is natural about the heroic couplet or the Spenserian stanza? Or even Dickinson's four-line hymn stanza—is that natural?

"We . . . found we needed meter and sometimes rhyme," writes Feirstein, "to create the contrapuntal tensions in the verse that would

match the tension in the action" (FF x). The norm here is by no means "natural," as Feirstein seems to think, but a specifically Romantic and Modernist one, coming down to us from Coleridge via I. A. Richards and Allen Tate. Indeed, despite their professed scorn for the dominant free-verse poetic of their immediate elders, the New Formalists, coming, as they do by and large, out of the very same writing programs and English departments, are given to statements like the following by Richard Moore: "It is now possible to become a Ph.D. in our literature and not have the foggiest notion of the few simple rules that Milton used in composing his lines" (FF 33). *Simple* rules? Milton, whose prosody is surely one of the most complex and difficult to characterize in English poetry? And in the same vein Dana Gioia asks, "Why . . . could a poet like Milton, an unquestioned master of the short, concentrated poem, also manage brilliant longer poems whereas our contemporaries cannot?" (FF 5). The answer, one might respond, is contained in the question, implying as it does that to "manage brilliant longer poems" is some sort of certifiable skill that poets "like Milton" (was there really any other poet like Milton?) have "mastered." Rather like the ability to fill out both the short and the long version of one's income tax form. Witness Gioia's own iambic pentameter:

> Turning the corner, we discovered it
> just as the old wrought-iron lamps went on—
> a quiet, tree-lined street, only one block long,
> resting between the noisy avenues. (FF 206)

It is hard to know what meter does for this prosaic account: the first two lines jog along, putting weight on syllables that require no foregrounding, whereas the third line, with its extra syllable and seven primary stresses, calls attention to the filler words "only one block long"—a bit of information which is largely redundant, the epiphany of light being exactly the same if the quiet and predictably tree-lined street were two blocks long.

Indeed—and this is one of the ironies of the current situation—a linguistic analysis would reveal that Dana Gioia's lineation is much closer to the model it purports to reject (say, the lyric of Richard Hugo) than it is to Wordsworth or Arnold or Frost. But this is not to say that the New Formalist critique of free verse is merely frivolous. What it tells us (and we will find surprisingly similar complaints lodged against standard free verse by the critique from the poetic left) is that the dominant modes of mid-century seem to be played out. Naked Poetry, Confessional Poetry, Open Form, Projective Verse—what could sound, in 1990, more tired? And the same holds true for comparable developments in

the other arts: the happening, the body sculpture, the "live" performance piece in the white-walled art gallery, the *Learning from Las Vegas* slot-machine decor, and "ugly is beautiful" tract house which is really custom-built and costs millions—these paradoxically seem to belong to a time now more remote than the avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s or, for that matter, more remote than the fin-de-siècle Vienna of Wittgenstein. What is it that has happened and where are we going? And what does our avant-garde—if that word still has meaning—look like?

I say "if" because the news that the avant-garde is dead is now widely circulated. In his influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (German edition, 1974; English translation, 1984), Peter Bürger defines the avant-garde as that specific movement in the early twentieth century which sought, not to develop, as had been the case in Impressionism or Cubism or Fauvism, a particular style, nor to attack prior schools of art, but to call into question the very role of "art" as an institution in a bourgeois society.[9] Whereas medieval and Renaissance art, so the argument goes, was subject to "collective performance" and "collective reception," the bourgeois art of the post-Enlightenment was largely produced by isolated individuals for other isolated individuals. Divorced from the "praxis of life," it became increasingly autonomous and elitist, culminating in the Aestheticism of the late nineteenth century. It is this autonomy, this institutionalization of capitalist art as "unassociated with the life praxis of men [*sic*]" that Dada and Surrealism challenged.[10]

When, for example—and this is Bürger's Exhibit A—Marcel Duchamp signs a mass-produced object (in this case an ordinary urinal) and sends it to an art exhibition bearing the title *Fountain by R. Mutt* (fig. 1.1), "he negates the category of individual production," thus mocking "all claims to individual creativity" (PB 51–52). And Bürger concludes:

> Duchamp's provocation not only unmasks the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art. Duchamp's Ready-Mades are not works of art but manifestations. Not from the form-content totality of the individual object Duchamp signs can one infer the meaning, but only from the contrast between mass-produced object on the one hand and signature and art exhibit on the other. It is obvious that this kind of provocation cannot be repeated indefinitely. The provocation depends on what it turns against. (PB 52)

This analysis, which has been widely accepted,[11] raises some hard questions. First, it implies that Duchamp might have made the same point by turning any mass-produced object into a readymade, that the object

chosen is entirely arbitrary. But to turn a urinal upside down and call it *Fountain* immediately produces a host of connotations, as does the "signature," R. Mutt, with its playful allusion to the "Mutt and Jeff" comic strip and its punning on *Armut* (in German, 'poverty'), *Mutti* ('Mama'), *Mut* ('courage'), or, more ingeniously, *ars mutt* ('art' in French + mongrel dog in American slang = mongrel art).[12]

Second, the shape of this "fountain" is equivocal: on the one hand, its now-classic abstract form relates it to any number of modernist sculptures; on the other, the relation of hole to whole, of straight line to curve, is itself sexually playful and hence semantically charged. What,
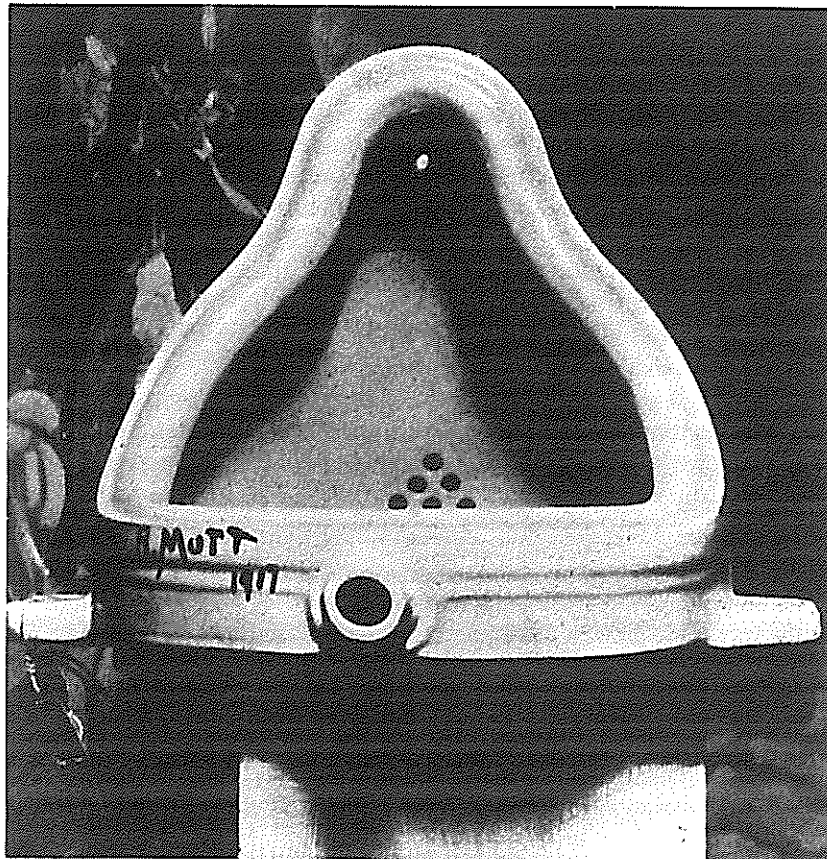

1.1 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz. From *The Blind Man*, No. 2 (New York, May 1917), p. 4. This was the only publicly known image of *Fountain* until World War II.

1.2 Marcel Duchamp, *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?* 1964 (replica of 1921 original). Painted metal birdcage containing 151 white marble blocks, thermometer, and piece of cuttlebone: cage, 4 7/8 × 8 3/4 × 6 3/8 inches. Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Gallerie Schwarz.

after all, is the relation of the male artist (Duchamp/R. Mutt) and of the urinal's original male function to this rounded organic shape, this highly suggestive female form called "fountain"?[13] Such sexual punning and double entendre regularly characterize Duchamp's readymades: witness the birdcage filled with sugar cubes (actually pieces of marble) called *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?* (fig. 1.2), with its thermometer and phallic-shaped cuttlebone, or again, the famous *Bicycle Wheel* (fig. 1.3), with its dislocated transportation system, its equivocation between indoors and outdoors, stasis and movement, its metal rod's male "penetration" of the female "seat," and its invitation to the viewer to give the wheel a spin.

Ironically, of course, the Duchampian signature on the "indifferent" object, which Bürger takes to be a pure protest against the capitalist art
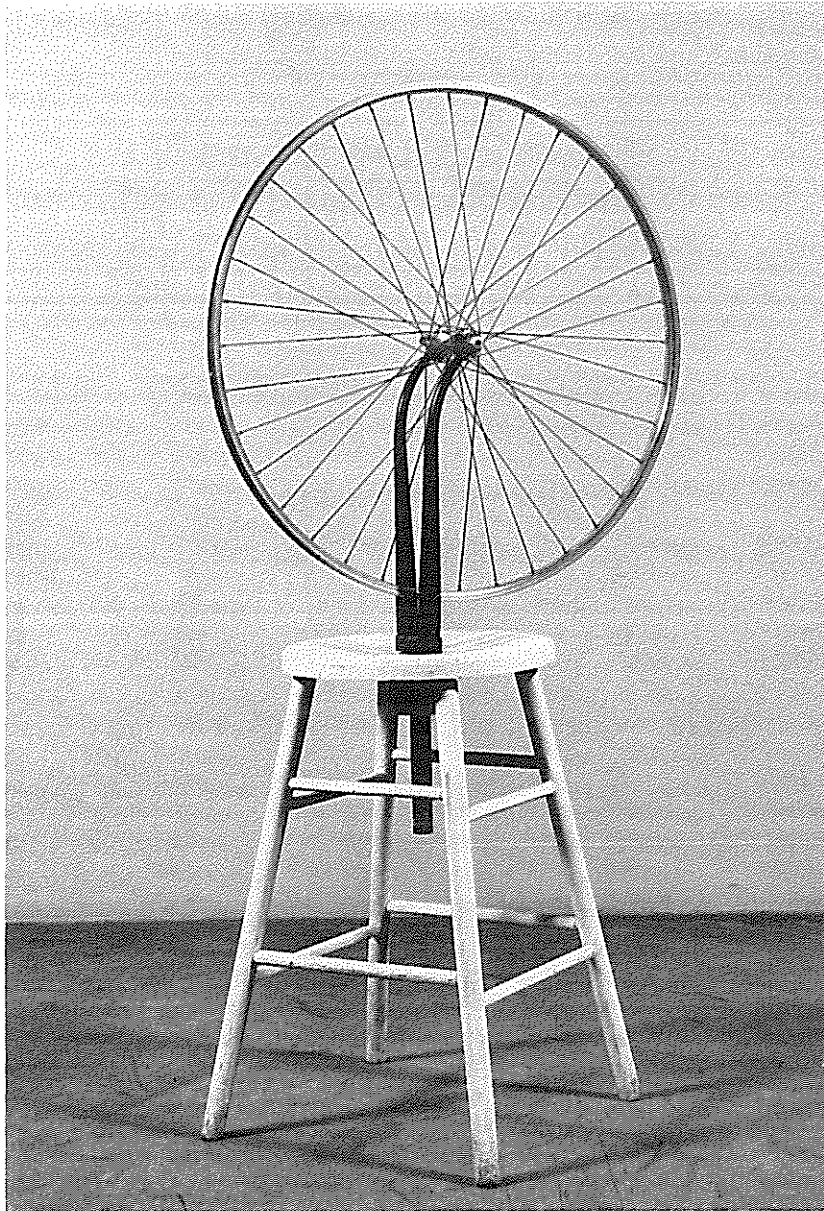
1.3 Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1951 (third version, after lost original of 1913). Assemblage: metal wheel, 25 1/2 inches in diameter, mounted on painted wood stool, 23 3/4 inches high; overall 50 1/2 inches high. Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, gift to the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

market, "where the signature means more than the quality of the work," has now become at least as prestigious as that of such "great" Modernists as Braque or Matisse. Absorption into the dominant museum culture testifies, so Bürger and like-minded critics have argued, to the inexorable commodification of artworks under capitalism. "The avant garde," writes Hal Foster, "helped to recycle the social discards of industrial capitalism back into its productive system, to mediate proletarian forms and subcultural styles (by the creation of new art, fashion, spectacles) in the interests not only of social control but also of commodity production."[14]

Given this premise, the so-called Neo-avant-garde is doomed from the start. Dada, Bürger argues, represents a moment of crisis that cannot be repeated: "Once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite. If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it" (PB 52). And, accordingly, "The Neo-avant-garde, which stages for the second time the avant-gardiste break with tradition, becomes a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever" (PB 61).

The thesis that the contemporary avant-garde is no more than a recycled version of Dada revolt, that it can do no more than spin, so to speak, its Duchampian wheels, returning again and again to the "scene of provocation" of the early century but devoid of that scene's inherently political motive, has become a commonplace of postmodern theorizing. "More and more," writes Hal Foster in "Against Pluralism," "art is directed by a cyclical mechanism akin to that which governs fashion, and the result is an ever-stylish neo-pop whose dimension is the popular past. An arrière-avant garde, such art functions in terms of returns and references rather than the utopian and anarchic transgressions of the avant garde" (REC 23). The notion of arrière-avant garde is picked up by Fredric Jameson, who argues that pastiche, which he defines as "blank parody," is the postmodern form par excellence because, "in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum."[15] And Andreas Huyssen observes: "The American postmodernist avant-garde . . . is not only the end game of avant-gardism. It also represents the fragmentation and decline of the avant-garde as a genuinely critical adversary culture."[16]

What then, asks Huyssen, is the relationship between avant-garde and postmodernism? Despite its "ultimate and perhaps inevitable fail-

ure," he posits, the avant-garde did aim "at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture," a relationship that is now central. The "Great Divide," as Huyssen calls the Modernist "discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture," breaks down: we now know that "not every work of art that does not conform to canonized notions of quality is therefore automatically a piece of Kitsch, and the working of Kitsch into art can indeed result in high-quality works" (AGD viii–ix). And throughout his book, Huyssen is at pains to be fair to such postmodern manifestations as Pop Art and especially to Andy Warhol, whom he takes very seriously.

Along the way, however, Huyssen is forced to admit that although the "postmodern sensibility of our time . . . raises the question of cultural tradition and conservation in the most fundamental way as an aesthetic and a political issue," it "doesn't always do it successfully, and often does it exploitatively" (AGD 216). How, then, does "art" respond "successfully" to popular culture and to what extent does popular culture successfully "contaminate" art? Huyssen calls for a "postmodernism of resistance, including resistance to that easy postmodernism of the 'anything goes' variety" (AGD 220), and he praises Pop Art for breaking through "the confines of the ivory tower in which art had been going around in circles in the 1950s" (AGD 142). Again, he refers to the new role of women "as a self-confident and creative force in the arts, in literature, film, and criticism," to ecology and the Green movements and to minority and Third World cultures as reconstituting the map of postmodernism and breaking down the dichotomy of high art/low art (AGD 220–21). But since the minority groups in question are hardly exemplars of mass culture, it is still not clear how that culture is to be incorporated into the new art. Indeed, by the end of the book, the focus has shifted from the great (high/low) divide in the arts to an emphasis on marginalization by the dominant culture as the key to postmodern art practices.

A similar case for oppressed groups is made by Fredric Jameson:

> The only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system: black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, gay literature, the *roman québécois*, the literature of the Third World; and this production is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system.[17]

Radical as this may sound, Jameson's invocation of the "marginal pockets of the social life of the world system" betrays a curiously Romantic nostalgia for a world elsewhere in which the authentic has "not yet" been destroyed or corrupted by the encroachment of first world imperialism and colonialism. But what if, as James Clifford has argued in a series of brilliant ethnographic studies, authenticity is itself no more than a relational term, a conscious "staging" in which a culture presents itself *in opposition* to external, often dominating alternatives"? As such, the "authentic" comes to be understood as a "constructed domain of truth," a "serious fiction."[18] Indeed "neither the experience nor the interpretive activity of the scientific researcher," in this case, the first world critic like Jameson, "can be considered innocent," criticism always being "a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects" (PC 41). Thus, appealing as it may be to regard artistic practice—say, the *roman québécois* or "British working-class rock"—as the province of a still exotic other, the work itself betrays, however obliquely, its awareness of the global teleculture within which it negotiates. So at least James Clifford's amusing anecdote about the Trobriander medicine man presiding over magic rites and distributing betel nuts from his bright blue plastic Adidas bag (PC 148) would suggest. Then too, in the United States, minority status has itself become a kind of commodity, a salable quantity in the marketplace, provided it is judged sufficiently representative by the very dominant culture deplored in Jameson's brief. Subject matter, in this scheme of things, is all. At the same time, poets who question the official cultural space of "diversity," a space in which the dominant paradigms of representation remain quite intact, who believe that oppositionality has to do, not only with what a poem says, but with the formal, modal, and generic choices it makes—its use, say, of a nontraditional rhythmic base, a particular vernacular, or an incorporation of cited nonpoetic material—these poets continue to be relegated to the margins.

What this contradiction (between a literature *literally* marginalized, that is, excluded by the dominant culture and known to only a small and specialized readership, and a literature whose marginality is, so to speak, certified and institutionalized) might mean remains elusive in Jameson's version of postindustrial society, with its "blank irony," its "death of the subject," and its "disappearance of a sense of history" (AA 125). Endgame, fragmentation, decline, the "no longer possible"— the vocabulary of apocalypse adumbrated by Jameson now pervades the discussion of art practices. In their recent *Postmodern Scene* (rather

sensationally subtitled *Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*),
Arthur Kroker and David Cook declare that "Ours is a *fin-de-millénium*
consciousness which, existing at the end of history in the twilight time
of ultramodernism (of technology) and hyper-primitivism (of public
moods), uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay against the
background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout." [19]

This was published in 1986 (fourteen years to go, as doomsayers were
putting it), and within just a few years, words like "radiation" and
"burnout" were perceived as much less threatening in the face of those
even newer words, *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Indeed, with the dissolu-
tion of the Soviet empire and the half-century-old East-West balance of
power, the kind of eschatological discourse we meet in Kroker and Cook
may soon give way to a new wave of Futuristic speculation, a search for
aesthetic possibilities latent in what now appears to be an ongoing and
open-ended series of global transformations.

At the moment however, the "sense of an ending" remains a power-
ful myth, even for critics not given to apocalyptic utterance. In
The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art (1986), for example,
Arthur C. Danto argues that the lesson to be learned from Duchamp's
readymades, as from Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans, is that there
are no longer objects with perceptible aesthetic properties, that, on the
contrary, the claim that, say, Duchamp's *Fountain* is a "work of art"
turns attention away from the work to the nature of interpretation. "In-
terpretation," writes Danto, "is in effect the lever with which an object
is lifted out of the real world and into the art-world. . . . Only in rela-
tionship to an interpretation is a material object an artwork" (DA 39).
Hence in our "post-historical period of art" (DA 111), we are witnessing
"the end of art" (one of Danto's chapter titles). When, for example,
Duchamp exhibits an ordinary snow shovel (fig. 1.4), identical to any
number of such shovels acquired from the same factory and wholly de-
void of aesthetic value, his gesture forces the viewer to generate an in-
terpretation to account for the work's claim to be art. Thus, "Art ends
with the advent of its own philosophy" (DA 107).

It is interesting that Danto provides no reproduction of Duchamp's
snow shovel nor does he mention that this readymade (curiously de-
familiarized by its isolated position in a glass case and hence seen as we
never see shovels in real life, where they are either arranged in rows at
the hardware store or stuck in a closet or covered with dirt or snow) is
called *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, with its suggestion of bourgeois
caution—the purchase of a shiny new snow shovel to prevent sidewalk
accidents that cause broken arms, the need for every proper household
to have a shovel, the shovel as industrialized society's replacement of
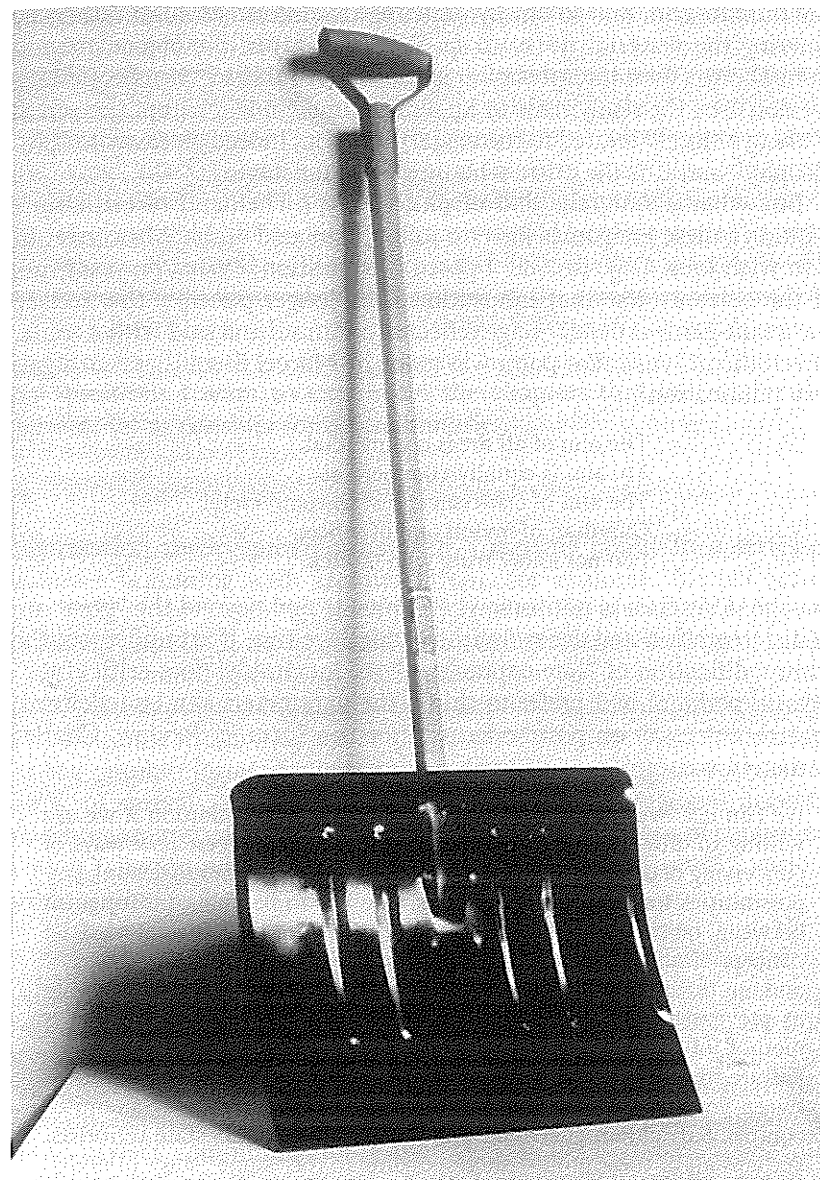
1.4 Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915 (New York; original lost;
2d version, obtained by Duchamp for Katherine S. Dreir). Readymade: wood and
galvanized-iron snow shovel, 47 3/4 inches high (121.3 cm). Inscribed on reverse of lower
edge, in white paint: "IN ADVANCE OF THE BROKEN ARM MARCEL DUCHAMP
(1915) *replica* 1945." Collection, Katherine S. Dreier, West Redding, Connecticut.

the human arm, and so on. By omitting this information, or rather, by denying the materiality (so to speak, the body) of the object in question, Danto's own interpretation is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy. Since we don't see the readymade or know its name (in Duchamp, the verbal is always closely related to the visual), art does indeed give way to "philosophy" and it is the critic who moves center stage.

But what about "the end of philosophy"? The "end of criticism"? Wouldn't these endgames have to follow "the end of art"? In conversation with John Cage in 1988, I posed the question: "What do you think of the current view that innovation is no longer possible, that indeed the avant-garde is dead?" Cage reflected a minute and said with a smile, "Even them?" A similar point was made by Marcel Broodthaers in a gallery publication:

> The aim of all art is commercial.
> My aim is equally commercial.
> The aim of criticism is just as commercial.
> Guardian of myself and of others,
> I do not know truly who to kick.[20]

Touché. Criticism is not somewhere outside and beyond the "great arc of disintegration and decay" within which we live: if art undergoes the commodification of "late capitalism," so, inevitably, does critical theory. Or perhaps, as I prefer to think, the parameters can be redefined. In a recent essay on postmodernism for the *Socialist Review*, Charles Bernstein writes:

> *We can act:* we are not trapped in the postmodern condition if we are willing to differentiate between works of art that suggest new ways of conceiving of our present world and those that seek rather to debunk any possibilities for meaning. To do this, one has to be able to distinguish between, on the one hand, a fragmentation that attempts to valorize the concept of a free-floating signifier unbounded to social significance . . . and, on the other, a fragmentation that reflects a conception of meaning as prevented by conventional narration and so uses disjunction as a method of tapping into other possibilities available within language. Failure to make such distinctions is similar to failing to distinguish between youth gangs, pacifist anarchists, Weatherpeople, anti-Sandinista contras, Salvadoran guerrillas, Islamic terrorists, or US state terrorists. Perhaps all of these groups are responding to the "same" stage of multi-national capitalism. But the crucial point is that the *responses* cannot be understood as the same, unified as various interrelated "symptoms" of late capitalism. Nor are the "dominant" practices the exemplary ones that tell the "whole" story.[21]

Like Cage's and Broodthaers's, Bernstein's is a refusal, so to speak, on the part of the *maker* of art to provide its receptor with so many exempla of a theory already in place.[22] It is also a refusal to make easy generalizations: to take just one example, our penchant for the comparison of "profitable 'postmodern' artworld commodities to what were, in their own time, obscure and noncommercial 'modern' artworks," the comparison serving mainly to point up the telling symptoms of contemporary decline and fall.[23] Indeed, perhaps it would be more useful to work the other way around and to consider, more closely than we usually do, what really happens on the video screen, at the computer terminal, or in the advertising media, and then to see how poetic or art discourse positions itself vis-à-vis these powerful new environments. These are the questions I want to explore in the chapters that follow; for the present, let us consider some preliminaries.

II

Information theory provides us with a starting point. In a series of volumes beginning with *Hermes* (1968), for example, Michel Serres has studied the meaning and function of *noise*, the word being defined as "the set of those phenomena of interference that become obstacles to communication." "Obstacles" may be a misleading word here, Serres's point being that *noise* is not only incidental but *essential* to communication, whether at the level of writing (e.g., "waverings in the graphic forms, failures in the drawing, spelling errors, and so on"), of speech ("stammerings, mispronunciations, regional accents, dysphonias, and cacophonies"), or of the technical means of communication ("background noise, jamming, static, cut-offs, hyteresis, various interruptions").[24]

If, for example, a letter is written in careless or illegible script, there is interference in the reading process, which is to say that noise slows down communication. "The cacographer and the epigraphist" exchange roles, struggling as they do with noise as the common enemy: "*To hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him.*" This third man, says Serres, is the *demon*, the "prosopopeia of noise" (H 67). Demon, because, with the exception of mathematics, "the kingdom of quasi-perfect communication," the "third man" is never successfully excluded. Indeed, in order for the "pure" discourse of mathematics to be possible, one must shut out the entire empiricist domain; "one must close one's eyes and cover one's ears to the song and the beauty of the sirens" (H 70).

Noise as unanticipated excess, as sirens' song—the phenomenon has always, of course, been with us. But given the complex electronic modes of communication that now exist, the possibility increases that what is received differs from what was sent.[25] The garbled or gratuitous FAX message is an obvious example. But Duchamp's "snow shovel" would be another—an example of an object whose reception depends largely on the noise that comes through the channel, on, for example, the information that its title is *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. In this sense, what the Russian Futurists called *ostranenie* ('making strange') increasingly becomes a function of the actual dissemination of the message, its sender not necessarily being equivalent to its original producer and its receiver hence playing a greatly enlarged role in the processing of the text.

This brings us to a consideration of the computer terminal itself. In an important recent essay, Richard A. Lanham points out that the use of the personal computer and its electronic display "is forcing a radical realignment of the alphabetic and graphic components of ordinary textual communication."[26] In the conventional printed book, after all, the written surface is, so Lanham reminds us, "not to be read aesthetically; that would only interfere with purely literate transparency." On the contrary, a page of print should stand to the thought conveyed "as a fine crystal goblet stands to the wine it contains" (RL 266). Such "unintermediated thought," such "unselfconscious transparency" has become, says Lanham, "a stylistic, one might almost say a cultural, ideal for Western civilization. The best style is the style not noticed; the best manners the most unobtrusive" (RL 266).

Enter pixeled ("pixels" are "picture elements," the dots which electronically paint the letters onto the computer screen) print, which calls the basic stylistic decorum of the "transparent" page into question. "Electronic typography is both creator-controlled and reader-controlled" (RL 266). I can, for example (especially with the MacIntosh) use a wide variety of Roman and Greek styles, redesign the shapes of the letters, make them brighter or dimmer, alter the alphabetic-graphic ratio of conventional literacy, alter the "normal" figure-ground relationships, and so on—all by touching a key. I can "transform" what is usually thought of as prose into what is usually thought of as poetry, simply by hitting the "indent" key and lineating the text. I can illuminate the text in various ways, use different colors, reformat it in italics or capitals, and so on. The textual surface has, in other words, become what Lanham calls "permanently bistable":

> We are always looking first AT [the text] and then THROUGH it, and this oscillation creates a different implied ideal of decorum, both stylistic

> and behavioral. Look THROUGH a text and you are in the familiar world of the Newtonian Interlude, where facts were facts, the world just "out there," folks sincere central selves, and the best writing style dropped from the writer as "simply and directly as a stone falls to the ground," just as Thoreau counseled. Look AT a text, however, and we have deconstructed the Newtonian world into Pirandello's and yearn to "act naturally." We have always had ways of triggering this oscillation, but the old ways—printing prose consecutively and verse not, layering figures of sound and arrangement on the stylistic surface until it squeaked—were clumsy, slow, unchangeable, and above all author-controlled. . . . The difference is profound. . . . You return, by electronic ambages, to that Renaissance *sprezzatura* of rehearsed spontaneity which Newtonian science so unceremoniously set aside. (RL 267–69)

Lanham's analysis seems to me an excellent antidote to the more abstract—and generally gloomy—explanations of the fate of "literature" under "late" or "multinational" capitalism, or within "consumer culture." For one thing, it refuses to grant large-scale explanatory force to designations that, as even Fredric Jameson has recently remarked with respect to his own use of the term "late capitalism," have become identified "as leftist logo[s] which [are] ideologically and politically boobytrapped" (CLLC, xxi). For another, if we take the longer historical view and consider such earlier nontransparent page design as that of the medieval scribe, who inevitably elaborated on his alphabet design in the interest of visual beauty, we can see that, for better or worse, we are now at a moment when transparency—the typography that is "as transparent as a crystal goblet"[27]—can once again give way to what the Russian Futurists called "the word as such" (*slovo kak takovoe*).

Not only does the boundary between "verse" and "prose" break down but also the boundary between "creator" and "critic." For as I read X's text on the computer screen, I can, again with the flick of a finger, change it in any number of ways, reformat it to my liking, "improve it." Indeed, in the "interactive fiction" being written for the computer, the reader can choose the story's outcome, according to a series of possible moves. And in digitalized music programs, the distinction between time and space breaks down, the "composer" using the "Music Mouse" to make geometric motions that are then translated, by the computer, into sounds (see Lanham 274).

Such "digital equivalency," Lanham believes, "means that we can no longer pursue literary study by itself: the other arts will form part of literary study in an essential way" (RL 273). Indeed, "the personal computer itself constitutes the ultimate postmodern work of art. It introduces and focuses all the rhetorical themes advanced by the arts from Futurism onward. . . . The interactive audience which outrageous Fu-

turist evenings forced upon Victorian conventions of passive silence finds its perfect fulfillment in the personal computer's radical enfranchisement of the perceiver. Cage's games of chance and Oldenburg's experiments in visual scaling become everyday routines in home computer graphics" (RL 279).

Such enthusiastic claims for the computer will strike many of us as excessively McLuhanesque, as too optimistic and uncritical of the culture within which and on which such technology operates. In what sense, after all, can such acquired behavior as computer formatting, largely conditioned as it is by the "hidden persuaders" of our culture, be considered "art"? What about the binary choices computer screen-prompts impose on the writer-reader, the necessity of always choosing between "yes" or "no," "up" or "down"? And, most disturbing, what about the gap between computer operation (a skill to be learned) and the internal computer system, which remains essentially inaccessible to the user? These are questions to which I shall return in later chapters. For the moment, however, I want to take up Lanham's very interesting suggestion that computer textuality transforms the way we *receive* as well as the way we create written texts and hence has important implications for the larger study of rhetoric.

Consider, for example, Lanham's discussion of *prose*, that little word taken for granted ever since Monsieur Jourdain was told (incorrectly, as it happens, since the short utterance units of speech are not its equivalent) that what he was speaking was prose. Lanham writes:

> So used are we to thinking black-and-white, continuous printed prose the norm of conceptual utterance, that it has taken a series of theoretical attacks and technological metamorphoses to make us see it for what it is: an act of extraordinary stylization, of remarkable, expressive self-denial. The lesson has been taught by theorists, from Marinetti to Burke and Derrida, and by personal computers which restore to the reader whole ranges of expressivity—graphics, fonts, typography, layout, color—which the prose stylist has abjured. Obviously these pressures will not *destroy* prose, but they may change its underlying decorum. And perhaps engender, at long last, a theory of prose style as radical artifice rather than native transparency. (RL 271)

This distinction between the prose of "radical artifice" and that of "native transparency" has been made by many of the poets I shall be discussing in subsequent chapters. Indeed, Lanham's proposals for a "returning rhetorical paideia" that might govern our study of electronic text, whether verbal, visual, or musical, are extremely useful in shifting attention away from content—the New Formalist prescription, say, that a poem tell a "good story," or the Foucaultian prescription that

every narrative is a coded account of power struggle—to the larger formal and theoretical issues relating to poetry today. But since Lanham's concerns are avowedly pedagogical rather than more specifically aesthetic, some qualification may be in order.

The most cursory survey of contemporary poetics would show that, at least as far as what Charles Bernstein calls "official verse culture"[28] is concerned, technology, whether computer technology or the video, audio, and print media, remains, quite simply, the enemy, the locus of commodification and reification against which a "genuine" poetic discourse must react. In part, as I shall suggest in later chapters, the most interesting poetic and artistic compositions of our time do position themselves, consciously or unconsciously, against the languages of TV and advertising, but the dialectic between the two is highly mediated. It is by no means a case, as poets sometimes complain, of "competing" with television, of pitting the "authentic" individual self against an impersonal, exploitative other that commodifies the consciousness of the duped masses. For authenticity, as Jed Rasula has recently suggested, is itself a commodity, a product based on a now-specious "ideology of privacy" that adheres to the following principles:

> (1) it must demonstrate a restraint of the stimulations or aggressions that inhere in charged or intense language; (2) it must display fidelity to the poet's personal life; (3) this fidelity, this "being true to life" must affirm a certain sufficiency inherent in all of us; (4) it must be an innocuous artifact and in no way seek to challenge its status as private concern of a handful of consumers.[29]

The myth of "private concern" (e.g., "let me tell you what happened to me yesterday") runs headlong, so Rasula suggests, into the reality of non-privacy in our world. "It's no longer a matter of 'meeting the world halfway,'" he writes; "there's no such thing as privacy—privacy has been deleted. Leisure time is now archaic. What is now called leisure or free time is, instead, a differently calibrated sort of duty, the zone of bricolage in which we cut and snip and sort and paste our attentions, so we become prosthetic supplements to the total-body effect of the media, the coherent and pervasive final report that drifts along just out the door." Which is to say, that "instead of producing objects for the subject, ours is a system that produces subjects for the object" (JR 77).

Most contemporary writing that currently passes by the name of "poetry" belongs in this category which Rasula wittily calls PSI, for "Poetry Systems Incorporated, a subsidiary to data management systems" (JR 78). The business of this particular corporation is to produce the specialty item known as "the self," and it is readily available in popular

magazines and at chain bookstores, its "corporate newsletter" being the *New York Times Book Review.* The "reader" for "PSI product" is, as is normal for TV, a digit, "a statistical guarantator of the precise scale of another kind of beast known as 'the audience.'" To this PSI-product audience, the "poem" is a form of instant uplift. Read one now and again and you'll participate in a ritual of "sensitivity" and "self-awareness." It is the mechanism of the poetry reading on campuses and in "poetry centers" across the United States.

At the same time, we are witnessing a poetic more consonant with the reading-writing mechanism of the new electronic "page." Like Serres and Lanham, Rasula places his emphasis on the writer *as reader.* "Normal channels," he suggests, "are the media of compliance. They are the means by which the unknown audience consents to captivity by testing positive to a numeracy syndrome, agreeing to a certain effacement in order to personally 'typify' some statistical groundswell" (JR 89). But when the audience—the reader—refuses "captivity" and demands a textuality that cannot be absorbed into or accommodated by the Mediaspeak or image field of "normal" telediscourse or digital display, a new interaction is produced, returning us, in Lanham's words "from a closed poetic to an open rhetoric."

III

Let us see how this might work in practice. The dominant poetic of the American sixties, a poetic, as I shall argue in subsequent chapters, of strenuous authenticity, the desire to present a self as natural, as organic, and as unmediated as possible, was likely to produce such "deep image" poems as the following by James Wright:

> From a Bus Window in Central Ohio,
> Just before a Thunder Shower
>
> Cribs loaded with roughage huddle together
> Before the north clouds.
> The wind tiptoes between poplars.
> The silver maple leaves squint
> Toward the ground.
> An old farmer, his scarlet face
> Apologetic with whiskey, swings back a barn door
> And calls a hundred black-and-white Holsteins
> From the clover field.[30]

Here the poem is conceived as an act of witnessing. The speaker-observer must capture the exact nuance of the moment, beginning with the long

documentary title that tells us just where and when the recorded experience took place. A "Bus Window in Central Ohio, Just before a Thunder Shower"—a changeless place, as it were, in the heart of the nation (buses have been around for a long time), and a natural occurrence. The poem's images, presented directly in a series of simple declarative present-tense sentences, graphically convey that moment of strange quiet that precedes a storm, the moment when the corn cribs seem to "huddle together," the wind to "tiptoe between poplars," and, in an especially vivid metaphor, the "silver maple leaves [to] squint / Toward the ground." It is also the moment when the old farmer, perfectly attuned as he is to the elements despite his habitual but "apologetic" drinking, knows that it is time to call in the cows.

Such short imagistic poems depend for their effect on what Robert Lowell called "the grace of accuracy,"[31] a quality Wright had in abundance. No word is wasted: the perceiver's eye moves from the ground to the sky and back again, capturing for the reader the precise *frisson* that precedes the Ohio thunderstorm. The observer himself remains outside the picture frame ("bus window"), a seemingly impassive observer, even as everything that is seen and felt is filtered through his consciousness, defining a moment of ominous waiting, a foreboding of pain yet to come. Even the sound features—the slow trochaic rhythm, stressed diphthongs, and the alliteration and assonance (e.g., "The *si*lver map*le leaves squint*") emphasizing the integrity of the line, which is unpunctuated by caesurae—contribute to the sense that we are witnessing a "calm before the storm."

"Perfect" as such small "deep image" poems are, they are also oddly unambitious. As in the case of the Concrete Poetry to be discussed in chapter 4, their minimalism may be said to mask a certain fear—the fear, perhaps, of confronting more of "Central Ohio" than the phenomenology of impending thunderstorms, the reluctance, moreover, to relate nature to culture, to consider the implications of using what has become a fairly standard free-verse form (a set of short, irregular lines surrounded by white space) and a fixed subject position in a world that increasingly questions the validity of such conventions. In this respect, we might compare "From a Bus Window" to a poetic construct like John Cage's *Lecture on the Weather,* written more than a decade later for the Bicentennial of the United States and performed at irregular intervals since then.

In his headnote to "Preface to 'Lecture on the Weather'" (the only text available in print),[32] Cage explains that when the work was first commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Richard Coulter suggested that it might be based on texts of Benjamin Franklin,

but *Poor Richard's Almanac* did not strike Cage's fancy and he turned instead to his beloved Henry David Thoreau, specifically the *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, the *Journal*, and *Walden*.

In the Preface to the resulting *Lecture on the Weather*, Cage sketches in the background of the project:

> The first thing I thought of doing in relation to this work was to find an anthology of American aspirational thought and subject it to chance operations. I thought the resultant complex would help to change our present intellectual climate. I called up Dover and asked whether they published such an anthology. They didn't. I called a part of Columbia University concerned with American History and asked about aspirational thought. They knew nothing about it. I called the Information Desk of the New York Public Library at 42nd Street. The man who answered said: You may think I'm not serious but I am; if you're interested in aspiration, go to the Children's Library on 52nd Street. I did. I found that anthologies for children are written by adults: they are what adults think are good for children. The thickest one was edited by [Henry Steele] Commager (*Documents of American History*). It is a collection of legal judgments, presidential reports, congressional speeches. I began to realize that what is called balance between the branches of our government is not balance at all: all the branches of our government are occupied by lawyers.
>
> Of all professions the law is the least concerned with aspiration. It is concerned with precedent, not with discovery. (LW 3–4)

How to subvert this state of affairs, how to subordinate precedent to discovery, all the while paying homage to the qualities of American ingenuity, pragmatism, and good sense epitomized for Cage in the person of Thoreau—this is the problematic addressed in *Lecture on the Weather*, a media work that deconstructs the media, a "lecture" whose words cannot be heard, a choral composition whose "voices" are disembodied presences, a performance piece that anyone can perform but in which no one is in the spotlight.

To begin with, *Lecture on the Weather* is not a lecture at all, but an elaborate rule-generated collage-work:

> Subjecting Thoreau's writings to *I Ching* chance operations to obtain collage texts, I prepared parts for twelve speaker-vocalists (or -instrumentalists), stating my preference that they be American men who had become Canadian citizens. Along with these parts go recordings by Maryanne Amacher of breeze, rain, and finally thunder and in the last (thunder) section a film by Luis Frangella representing lightning by means of briefly projected negatives of Thoreau's drawings.[33]

Here, as so often in his "production notes," Cage assumes a casual air that his actual work belies. For one thing, the agreed-upon time-length for the spoken parts is rigidly fixed ("at least 22′45″ [5′ × 4′33″] and not more than 36′24″ [8′ × 4′33″])," the numerical reference being, of course, to Cage's famous early prepared piano piece *4′33″*. Again, the "entrance" of the taped sound events—breeze, rain, and thunder—is precisely timed, the breeze "to be faded in at the beginning," the rain "to be faded in after 11 or 12% of the total agreed-upon performance time-length has elapsed," and the thunder "to enter abruptly after 63 to 70% . . . has elapsed." Further directions indicate when the lights are to be lowered, when the "lightning" slides are to be projected, and inform the performers that the recording of thunder should "stop abruptly" before those of breeze and rain fade out, but that "this stop [should not] interrupt a thunderclap."

Thus, although the Thoreau texts themselves are chosen by chance operations, their actual collocation, together with sounds and visual images, is a strictly planned mathematical system. Since no single passage from Thoreau is repeated twice, and since each of the twelve text-sets must have the same length, the performance of the simultaneous reading is anything but random. The chance operation, in this context, is more properly understood as a form of constraint, a rule-generated process within which "weather conditions" occur.

Weather: "The condition of the atmosphere at a given place and time with respect to heat or cold, quantity of sunshine, presence or absence of rain, hail, thunder, fog, etc., violence or gentleness of the winds. Also the condition of the atmosphere regarded as subject to vicissitudes" (*OED*). Here is the key to Cage's composition, in which a strict rule-bound process is subjected to the "vicissitudes" of the "atmosphere at a given place and time." Specific events (whether the speaker-vocalists stand or sit and where they are located in relation to the audience, how or whether the audience is seated, whether the performance space is large or small, open or closed, etc.) inevitably differ from performance to performance. At the California Institute of the Arts (Valencia) performance in March 1984, the "theatre" was a large empty room with bare floorboards, rather like a gym, with a platform at one end, on which the twelve speaker-vocalists were placed, a projection screen behind them covering the whole wall. At the Strathmore Hall "Cagefest" in May 1989 (Rockville, Md.), on the other hand, the performance space was a much smaller conference room with french doors on one side and a fireplace on the other; the speaker-vocalists sat at a long table in front of the fireplace, facing the audience, which was quite conventionally seated in rows.
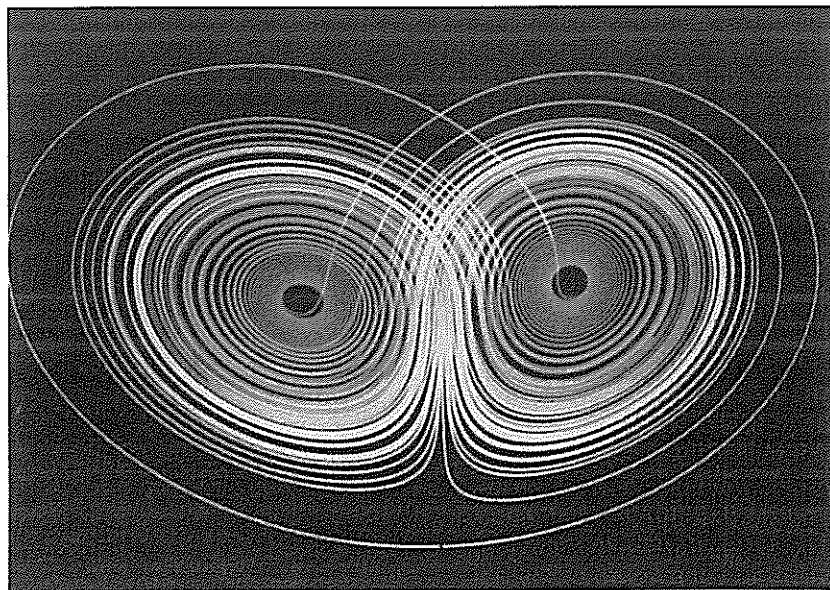
1.5 Heinz-Otto Peitgen, *The Lorenz Attractor*, in James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 1988), opposite p. 114.

No single version of *Lecture on the Weather*, whether live or video-taped, can thus claim the authority of representing the "real" Cage text, which therefore functions as a score-to-be-activated rather than as an art object to be replicated. Or, to put it in terms of chaos theory, which has many applications to Cage's work, the performance functions as a "strange attractor" or "unpredictable system," which "collapses to a point" at "a single instant in time," only to change, "ever so slightly" at the next instant (see fig. 1.5).[34]

But, as in the case of a "strange attractor," the loops and spirals of this particular structure stay within a finite space. No matter what the conditions of a given performance, the "lecture" opens with the recitation of the twelve vocalists, simultaneously reading twelve different sets of excerpts from Thoreau (from *Walden*, the *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, and the *Journal*),[35] while "weather" sounds (recordings of breeze, then rain, and, about two-thirds of the way through, thunder, the house gradually being darkened) begin to be heard, emanating from the walls or ceiling. The audience thus finds itself, not passively attending a lecture (indeed, the simultaneity of recited speech reflects, as

Cage has frequently remarked, our larger inability to listen to one another),[36] but participating in an environment. The performance, accordingly, is not *about* weather; it *is* weather.

At first, when one hears gentle breeze, birds chirping, and then light rain, one reminds oneself that this is, after all, mere sound effect, rather like a movie sound track; that the sound is not, in fact, "real." But as the rain becomes more insistent, as lightning flashes and thunderclaps begin to drown out the reading of Thoreau's text, a strange thing begins to happen—at least it did at the Cal Arts performance I attended. The audience, scattered around the room, some standing, some sitting on the floor, began to move closer and closer together. By the time the storm "broke," lightning flashes appearing on the large screen in the form of briefly projected negatives of drawings by Thoreau,[37] the audience had become something of a football huddle. Everyone wanted to join together and get out of the storm.

But because the "path" of this strange attractor is unpredictable, the communion I have described may be achieved in other ways. At the Strathmore Hall performance, for example, it happened (the "vicissitudes" of atmospheric conditions) that a torrential rain and thunderstorm took place just as the performance was beginning and, since the french doors were open to the outside, "this had," in the words of Joan Retallack, "the lovely effect of eradicating the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside'—the room, the performance, the concept of weather, as Cage presents it to us, including the 'weather' of coincidences, voices, ideas—all combining to cause the kind of storm that occurs in a particular . . . climate. That particular experience of that particular weather . . . in Rockville Md., May 5, 1989 at approximately 9 pm could only assume its particular and variable character with the kind of permeable boundaries—between the inside and outside of his pieces—that Cage structures into all of his work" (JR 6). Indeed, given the basic time-space constraints and the specific verbal, aural, and visual procedures designed by Cage for the *Lecture* (the "inside" of the piece), any number of other "weather conditions" (the "outside") are obviously possible.

Yet the multiplication of situations does not change the basic "shape" of the work. Toward the end of his Preface, Cage remarks, "More than anything else we need communion with everyone. Struggles for power have nothing to do with communion. Communion extends beyond borders: it is with one's enemies also. Thoreau said: 'The best communion men have is in silence'" (LW 5). This is the insight *Lecture on the Weather* enacts, whatever its specific performance conditions. Instead

of lecturing us on communion, instead of defining community in terms of verbal images and metaphors, the piece gradually *transforms* a skeptical audience (an audience that cannot "hear" the words recited) into a community: by the end, when the storm is subsiding and patches of sunlight appear, we are all in it together.

Here, then, is a text peculiarly for the times. *Lecture on the Weather* is a verbal-visual-musical composition that relies on current technology for its execution. There is no complete written text, since the printed page cannot reproduce the simultaneous visual and sound features of the "lecture." The coordination of vocal elements, sound, and film image is achieved by elaborate computer calculations. Yet, so the "lecture" implies, the availability of such technology by no means implies that we are now slaves to automation and commodification, that we have come to the endgame of art. On the contrary, Cage is suggesting that even as the early New England settlers achieved a sense of community out of mutual deprivation, hardship, and want, two hundred years later, our own "deprivation" (the glut, for example, of "aspirational" writing as well as of media discourse) can be overcome, not by finding books in the library that will talk *about* community, but by finding ways to actually have it happen.

"An adequate theory of prose," Richard Lanham suggests, would reconceive prose style "as radical artifice rather than native transparency." That, too, is the paradox of *Lecture on the Weather.* Cage is too often misunderstood as the champion of the natural, the advocate of art as a "purposeless play" that is "simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord."[38] And in the "Preface to *Lecture on the Weather*," Cage cites Thoreau as saying, "Music is continuous; only listening is intermittent."

What Cage means by such statements is that the art construct must consistently tap into "life," must *use* what really happens in the external world as its materials, and that, vice versa, "life" is only "lived" when we perceive it as form and structure. But nothing is less *transparent* than a composition like *Lecture on the Weather,* in which the resources of such various media as film, soundtrack, pictogram, musical instrument, and of various genres like lecture, poem, journal, and drama are integrated by means of what Lanham calls "radical artifice." Indeed, the Duchamp readymade, which has had a profound influence on Cage's work and which Peter Bürger takes to be a kind of endpoint of avant-garde art (the "provocation" produced by the claim that an "ordinary" urinal could be construed as a work of art "cannot be repeated

indefinitely," PB 52), here finds its antithetical match. Let me try to explain.

If the readymade is an "ordinary" industrial object, the "lecture on the weather" is a fabricated, simulated natural event. If the readymade turns a useful object (urinal, bicycle wheel, snow shovel, bottle rack) into an impersonal work of art, the "lecture" on weather turns the simulated event into one that behaves like a real one, causing the audience to take shelter from the cruel elements. Finally, if the readymade was appropriate to its modernist moment, a witty critique of "high art" pieties and prejudices in the early twentieth century, works like *Lecture on the Weather* are nothing if not appropriate to our moment, calling into question as they do our preoccupation with the lecture format— not only university lecture, of course, but any "address" A makes to B and C, whether on radio or TV, whether formal political address or the promotion of a new cosmetic product.

Whatever lectures we give or we attend, after all, none of us are likely to think of them as dangerous; on the contrary, the lecture is regarded as a little island of safety in a world of crowding, assault, and the unfriendly elements, like the tiptoeing hiss of the wind "between poplars" in Wright's weather poem. Accordingly, Cage created a lecture that would assault us with frightening noises and images, that would make us wish we were merely driving in freeway traffic. We might call it a case of defamiliarization, but defamiliarization of a sort the Russian Formalists, who disseminated the concept, would be hard put to recognize, the object of a work like *Lecture on the Weather* being, not to make the stone stony, but to stage an "event" that can change our environment and how we respond to it.

Such simulation is, of course, a case of marked artifice. Whereas Modernist poetics was overwhelmingly committed, at least in theory, to the "natural look," whether at the level of speech (Yeats's "natural words in the natural order"), the level of image (Pound's "the natural object is always the adequate symbol"), or the level of verse form ("free" verse being judged for the better part of the century as somehow more "natural" than meter and stanzaic structure), we are now witnessing a return to *artifice,* but a "radical artifice," to use Lanham's phrase, characterized by its opposition, not only to "the language really spoken by men" but also to what is loosely called Formalist (whether New or Old) verse, with its elaborate poetic diction and self-conscious return to "established" forms and genres. Artifice, in this sense, is less a matter of ingenuity and manner, of elaboration and elegant subterfuge, than of the recognition that a poem or painting or performance text is a

made thing—contrived, constructed, chosen—and that its reading is also a construction on the part of its audience. At its best, such construction empowers the audience by altering its perceptions of how things happen. Thus, even though a work like *Lecture on the Weather* is a collage of found texts—extracts from Thoreau, replicas of bird calls, recordings of thunder—its "weather" is charged with possibilities.

2   *The Changing Face of Common Intercourse: Talk Poetry, Talk Show, and the Scene of Writing*

. . . the natural words in the natural order is the formula.
—W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley[1]

. . . the natural object is always the adequate symbol.
—Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect"[2]

"Natural": the very word should be struck from the language.
—Charles Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men"[3]

In his famous lecture "The Music of Poetry" (1942), T. S. Eliot declares:

> there is one law of nature more powerful than any [other] . . . the law that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear. Whether poetry is accentual or syllabic, rhymed or rhymeless, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose contact with the changing face of common intercourse.[4]

And a few pages later:

> So, while poetry attempts to convey something beyond what is conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, *one person talking to another.* . . . Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be, a *return to common speech.* This is the revolution which Wordsworth announced in his prefaces, and he was right: but the same revolution had been carried out a century before by Oldham, Waller, Denham, and Dryden; and the same revolution was due again something over a century later. . . . No poetry, of course, is ever exactly the same speech that the poet talks and hears: but it has to be in such a relation to the speech of his time that the listener or reader can say 'that is how I should talk if I could talk poetry.' (OPP 23–24; my italics)

Poetry as the simulation of natural speech: taken at face value, Eliot's precept is, by his own account, in the straight line of Wordsworth; the poet, according to the 1800 "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," is first and foremost "a man speaking to men."[5] Not that Eliot shares Wordsworth's faith in the language of "low and rustic life" as that which is most attuned to "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." "It is not the business of the poet," he writes, "to talk like *any* class of society, but like himself—rather better, we hope, than any ac-

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, compiled by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees, and James Taylor, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1938), p. 1.

2. *CompuServe Magazine*, October 1990, p. 22.

3. John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, no. 17, in *The Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1952), p. 441.

4. See "Professional Notes and Comment," *PMLA* 105 (October 1990): 1176. The first issue of ⟨*Postmodern Culture*⟩, Fall 1990, includes fiction as well as critical writing by Kathy Acker, John Beverley, Bell Hooks, Laura Kipnis, Neil Larsen, and Andrew Ross.

5. See Richard A. Lanham, "The Electronic Word: Literary Study and the Digital Revolution," *New Literary History* 20 (Winter 1989): 265–90. I take up Lanham's argument below.

6. It may seem ironic that a movement wedded to tradition, to what is, so to speak, "Making It Old," should call itself the *New* Formalism, *New* Narrative Poetry, etc. But what such epithets signify is that even such "traditional" poets cannot escape the contemporary market pressure to claim novelty, originality, difference. In this scheme of things, the "old" is never good enough: it must become the "new old."

7. *Expansive Poetry: Essays on the New Narrative and the new Formalism*, ed. Frederick Feirstein, Introduction with Frederick Turner (Santa Cruz, CA: Story Line Press, 1989), pp. vii–xv. Subsequently cited in the text as FF.

8. See on this point Wyatt Prunty, "Emaciated Poetry," FF 176–94, esp. 183.

9. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 49. Subsequently cited in the text as PB; Schulte-Sasse's important Foreword, to which I shall also refer, is cited as SS.

10. Here Bürger takes issue with the Frankfurt school's still prevalent theory of modernity. Adorno, for example, held that in a society in which exchange value had come to dominate, the "authentic" artwork must actively "resist" society, negating its practices and cleansing itself from all practical concerns. Modernist art, in this sense, stands opposed to the culture industry with its kitsch and commodification. For an interesting critique of Adorno's distinction between "art" and "kitsch," see SS, pp. xvi–xxvi; M. Jimenez, "Théorie critique et théorie de l'art," in *Revue d'ésthetique* 1–2 (1975): 139–62.

11. In his Foreword, Jochen Schulte-Sasse writes, "In its accurate and historically reflected definition of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger's *Theory* can hardly be overestimated" (SS xlvi).

In *Au Nom de l'art: Pour une archéologie de la modernité* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1989), Thierry de Duve provides a fascinating account of how Duchamp's readymades like *Fountain* force us to redefine the word "art." But although de Duve does not share Bürger's ideological perspective, he too takes as a given that Duchamp's urinal is in itself an arbitrarily chosen and wholly ordinary object. In *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), Arthur C. Danto similarly writes: "Duchamp's *Fountain* is, as everyone knows, to all outward appearances a urinal—it was a urinal until it became a work of art and acquired such further properties as works of art possess in excess of those possessed by mere real things like urinals. . . . But then what is the conceptual fulcrum of this still controversial work? My view is that it lies in the question it poses, namely why—referring to itself—should this be an artwork when something else exactly *like* this, namely *that*—referring now to the class of unredeemed urinals—are just pieces of industrial plumbing?" (pp. 14–15).

12. The porcelain urinal came from the J. L. Mott Iron Works in Philadelphia. Duchamp later explained that he changed "Mott" to "Mutt"

> after the daily strip cartoon "Mutt and Jeff," which appeared at the time, and with which everyone was familiar. Thus, from the start there was an interplay of Mutt: a fat little funny man, and Jeff: a tall thin man. . . . And I added Richard [French slang for money bags]. That's not a bad name for a "pissotière."
>
> Get it? The opposite of poverty. But not even that much, just R. MUTT.

This comment, originally cited by Otto Hahn ("Passport No. G 255300," *Art and Artists* 1, no. 4 [July 1966]: 10), is reprinted, with a wealth of other information about *Fountain*, in William A. Camfield's excellent *Marcel Duchamp Fountain* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1989); see esp. 21–60. Camfield also notes (p. 23, n. 21) that "Mutt" is a mirror reversal of *Tu'M*, Duchamp's painting of 1918, which includes shadows of readymades. Subsequently cited as WAC.

13. Camfield also notes a further irony in that *Fountain* "was changed from a receptacle for waste fluid to a dispenser, a fountain of life-giving water" (WAC 53).

14. Hal Foster, "Between Modernism and the Media," *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), p. 35. Subsequently cited as REC.

15. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), p. 115. Subsequently cited as AA. In the revised version of this essay called "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146 (July–August 1984): 59–92, which is, in turn, reprinted in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), the wording is slightly different: "With the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style—what is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints . . . the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of

dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (pp. 17–18). This text is subsequently cited as CLLC.

16. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 170. Subsequently cited in the text as AGD.

17. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 140.

18. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 1–12. Subsequently cited in the text as PC.

For the larger argument, see especially Clifford's chapter "On Ethnographic Authority" (PC 21–54), which contains a trenchant critique of the attempt, on the part of early twentieth-century anthropologists like Mead and Malinowski, to "enter" the alien culture that was taken to be the object of study.

19. Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), p. 8.

20. Marcel Broodthaers, *Art Actuel* (Brussels: Galerie MTL, 1970); cited in Michael Compton, "In Praise of the Subject," *Marcel Broodthaers* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; New York: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 49.

21. Charles Bernstein, "Centering the Postmodern," *Socialist Review* 19 (1989): 48.

22. See, on this point, George Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), esp. chap. 3: "Jameson's Perelman: Reification and the Material Signifier," in which Hartley, also writing from a Marxist perspective, argues that Jameson's reading of Bob Perelman's poem "China" as an instance of schizophrenic language misses the real force of the poem.

23. "Centering the Postmodern," 52–53. My own favorite example of this sort of comparison is that, frequently made, between Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Coppolla's film *Apocalypse Now*, which was overtly based on Conrad's novel. But such overt debts mean little: Coppolla's commercial venture has much less in common with the deep structure of *Heart of Darkness* than do such intertexts as Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Beckett's *The Lost Ones*, or Steve McCaffery's *Panopticon*.

24. Michel Serres, *Hermes ou la communication* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1968), p. 40. I cite the translation, published as *Hermes*, ed. Josue V. Harari and David F. Bell, trans. Harari, Bell, et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 66. Subsequently cited in the text as H.

25. See, on this point, William R. Paulson, *The Noise of Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 83.

26. Richard A. Lanham, "The Electronic Word," *New Literary History*, p. 265, subsequently cited in the text as RL. See also, Lanham, "The Extraordinary Convergence: Democracy, Technology, Theory, and the University Curriculum," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 27–50.

27. The phrase is Beatrice Warde's in *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1956), p. 11, as cited in Lanham, "Extraordinary Convergence," 31, 50.

28. Charles Bernstein, "The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA," *Content's Dream: Essays, 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), pp. 244–51. Subsequently cited in the text as CD.

29. Jed Rasula, "Literary Effects in the Wad: Handling the Fiction, Nursing the Wounds," *Sulfur* 24 (Spring 1989): 77. Subsequently cited in the text as JR.

30. James Wright, *Collected Poems* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), pp. 127–28. "From a Bus Window . . ." first appeared in *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963).

31. Robert Lowell, "Epilogue," *Day by Day* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. 127.

32. John Cage, "Preface to *Lecture on the Weather,*" *Empty Words: Writings '73–'78* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), pp. 3–5, subsequently cited as LW. Individual performances of *Lecture on the Weather* have been videotaped but at this writing none are available for sale or rent.

33. Cage's references, here and elsewhere, to "*I Ching* chance operations" have often been misunderstood. He first came across the *I Ching, Book of Changes*, when the Bollingen edition, translated from the Chinese by Cary Baynes, was published in 1950. Using the *I Ching* method of throwing coins or marked sticks that, like the throw of dice, provided him with particular numbers, Cage then located the numbers in question on a complicated system of charts in the book itself. The charts, in turn, provided specific answers: in the case of the Thoreau text, for example, they would tell him with which letter or word to begin, and so on. But the *I Ching* (now transferred to various computer programs, designed for Cage by his assistants) constitutes no more than a starting point, the composition itself depending on rules that Cage himself invents and which are discussed below.

The typescript of the performance directions and the twelve collage-texts used in *Lecture on the Weather* have been made available to me by Marilyn Boyd de Reggi, the organizer of the John Cage Symposium at the Strathmore Hall Arts Center in Rockville, Maryland, on 5–6 May 1989, at which *Lecture on the Weather* was performed. I also have a copy of the videotape of that performance, of which more will be said below.

34. See James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), pp. 132–35. The analogy between Cage's structure and a "strange attractor" was suggested to me by Joan Retallack, unpublished manuscript contained in a letter to me, 15 April 1990, cited by permission of the author as JR. Joan Retallack attended the Strathmore Hall performance of *Lecture on the Weather* (which I have only seen on videotape) and I am further indebted to her for providing a detailed account of it.

35. For example, while Reciter 1 reads, "I have found repeatedly, of late years, that I cannot fish without falling a little in self-respect, I have tried it again and again" (*Journal*), Reciter 2 reads, "If a man who has no property

refuses but once to earn nine shillings for the state, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by any law that I know. . . ." (*Civil Disobedience*), and so on.

36. This is a point Cage made in the question period following the Strathmore Hall performance.

37. Cage's directions read: "The film should be framed slightly larger than the screen so that some of the drawings could project outside of it. This gives the film of lightning a more environmental dimension."

38. John Cage, *Silence* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), p. 12.

Chapter 2

1. W. B. Yeats, *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London: Oxford, 1964), p. 56. Subsequently cited in the text as LDW.

2. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 5. Subsequently cited in the text as LE.

3. Charles Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men," *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), p. 40. This book is subsequently cited in the text as CD.

4. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961), p. 21. Subsequently cited in the text as OPP.

5. William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, with Pastoral and Other Poems" (1802), *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, vol. 1 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 877. Subsequently cited in the text as WWP.

6. T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism. Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (1933; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 63. Subsequently cited as UPUC. Wordsworth's emphasis on rustic life, says Eliot, has to do with the particular social conditions of his time, when rural life was increasingly destroyed by rapid industrialization: "It is Wordsworth's social interest that inspires his own novelty of form in verse, and backs up his explicit remarks upon poetic diction," p. 65.

7. I purposely say poetics, not poetry: in practice, of course, "natural speech" was itself a carefully crafted simulation, especially for Yeats whose syntactic and verbal artifices are legendary. But what interests me is that, with notable exceptions like Gertrude Stein and Hart Crane, the major Anglo-American modernists regarded the speech model as normative. Indeed, the "artifice" of Crane's style was held against him in his own day; only in the later twentieth century has this style come in for revaluation and, as I suggest in chapter 6, we are now witnessing a Crane influence, for instance in the case of Charles Bernstein. On the artifices of Stein's poetry (again now exerting a strong influence on the poetry of Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Bruce Andrews, and others), see my *Poetic License: Essays in Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 145–59.