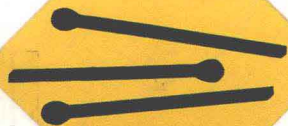


TEN to ONE

selected poems



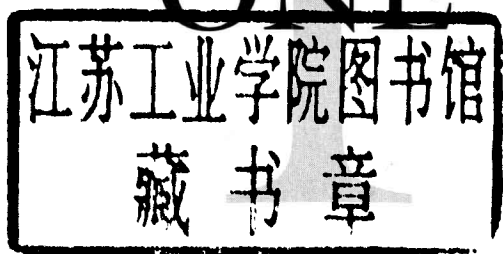
BOB PERELMAN

X
TEN

TO

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Bob Perelman



Selected Poems

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This book is dedicated to Francie Shaw

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“The Marginalization of Poetry” has appeared (among other places) in *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

Introduction

Walter Benjamin imagined a perfect criticism that would only quote the material it studied. In trying to write this introduction I've increasingly felt the spirit of that desire—to get out of the way and let the poems speak, sing, make noise, counterpunch, loll & invite, do whatever it is they do. But writing, whether of poetry, criticism, theory, or whatever generic hybrid, is a pragmatic activity. So a few remarks might help these poems find new readers.

The first book represented here, *Braille* (1975), was culled from a year-long series of improvisations, inspired by reading Williams's *Kora in Hell* and, less directly, by Vallejo's *Trilce*. The next book, *7 Works* (1978), was written after I entered the Bay Area literary environment that would come to be known as Language Writing. Cut up and collage, which I noticed via Ted Berrigan, John Ashbery, and William Burroughs, were the ruling principles here. But, unlike in Burroughs's cut ups, the point wasn't to undo the *Time* magazine prose world. For me, writing "An Autobiography" with words from Mozart, Shackleton, and Stendhal was a way of sneaking up on a theatrically overdetermined representation of a person. Stitching together swaths of writing from different centuries made for more capacious emotional, psychological, and historical spaces than my own single could have generated.

While collage can display freedom from time and place, it can also display a skittish refusal of any location outside itself. How to speak to one's own time and place without simply reflecting it and locking into that apparent inertia? My later books take on this problem: in the contemporary environment of mass audiences and fragmented art audiences, sound bites passing for information, slogans passing for community, how to make new meaning that also points in a meaningful direction. Sound is crucial, as the site both of pleasure and of ideology; so are the perspectives that playing with form can provide. I want the sound of the poem and the form—the poem's 'plot'—to keep readers stimulated. (Form, in this sense, *is* more than an extension of content.)

Since I've mentioned Language Writing, I'd like to counter a common misunderstanding that sees it as denying meaning or reference. What I've gotten from my involvement with it is an appetite for poetic techniques—avant or not, as long as they're useful for trying to write the present. For instance, the following poem from *The Future of Memory*:

FAKE DREAM: THE LIBRARY

January 28: We were going to
have sex in the stacks. We

were in the 800s, standing eagerly
amid the old copies of the

Romantics. Looking at the dark blue
spines of Wordsworth's *Collected*, I thought

how the intensity of his need
to express his unplaced social being

in sentences had produced publicly verifiable
beauty so that his subsequent civic

aspirations seemed to have importance enough
for him to become Poet Laureate

and how his later leaden writing
upheld that intensity and verifiability, only

instead of searching wind and rocks
and retina for the sentences of

his social being, he chirped his
confirmed lofty perch to other social

beings in lengthy claustrophobic hallelujahs for
the present moment. There are devices

to keep it still, long enough,
and he had learned them. Rhyme

was a burden, crime was unambiguously,
explainably wrong, time had snuck around

behind him. He had carved his
own anxiety into a throne and

now he was stuck on it,
remembering sadder days when he had

wanted to be happy with a
purity that made him blink, thinking

back. He remembered in a trance:
the past seemed unbearably near. Our

more slippery, contrapuntal hallelujahs were planted
in the immediate future, only a

few buttons, zippers and a little
elastic down the road. We had

first snuck into the men's room
but it had been crowded with

two intensely separated men hunched at
urinals 1 and 6. We turned

to hurry out, and you pointed
to the magic marker graffiti on

the beige tiles: "This place needs
a women's touch" answered by "FINGER

MY ASSHOLE, CUNT!" This second message
had been modified by an arrow

indicating "CUNT" was to be moved
from behind to before "ASSHOLE": "FINGER

MY CUNT, ASSHOLE!" We were eager
to prove syntax was not mere

vanity and that bodies could use
it to resist the tyranny of

elemental words. And wouldn't it be
nice to get knowledge and pleasure

on the same page. So we'd
hurried out to the deserted 800s.

Like the title says, it's a fake dream. But the various writing situations in it are true to the present. Wordsworth was almost a democratic poet, almost an avant-gardist; for many of his contemporary readers I imagine he embodied a self not beholden to inherited class horizons. But he achieved this at the cost of an idealized Nature, mute and female, and an infantilized sister (I'm referring to her image in his poems, not the person Dorothy). And by the end of his career he was writing sonnet sequences justifying capital punishment.

For living poets writing is closer to a graffiti situation than to inscribing the canonized pages of Wordsworth. Our pages are not pristine, they're scrawled over with prior social postings, threats, blandishments. From the vantage of the men's room, the particular snarl of shame, rage, and threatened violence is all too familiar. Despite the poem's humor and its messing around with narrative probabilities, I'm quite serious about the need to resist the tyranny of elemental words. Which are what? Jew? Serb? Woman? God? Cunt? Nature? Poetry? They're words that brook no argument, that are intended to be outside of syntax and thus outside of history. I try to resist these when I write. So I'm all for that third graffitist—a woman? a man? gay? straight?—who drew the arrows and critiqued the male threat, mocked it, began to undo it. Elemental words are always a threat, to whoever's outside their slanted beneficence. Resisting elemental words is a prerequisite to the pleasures that poetry can offer.

I am against an elemental sense of poetry: as I write at the end of *Face Value*, "This isn't eternity, have I said that yet?" This does not mean that I imagine the present to be some kind of Hegelian or post-modern or just plain dystopian "end of poetry." What's in this book is nothing if not poetry. My allegiance is pledged. But poetry, for me, remains alive by its insistence that there are no last words.

Philadelphia, July 5, 1999

Ten to One

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PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Tongue through the door. I taste what I think and then it's available. A car's speed weeps, but this balances largely, large tottering stand always at you, this vocal existence. Life exists elsewhere as well. Pulse returning, hot on the trail.

Then there's the dainty look of a field being looked at. Ants busy, sky pitched. Or a three day rain, lap it up. On board the lap, leaving silence. Elsewhere elseperson announcing its else in bonged norms, the call of the universe.

CULTURE

Urge of rain greying the arches. Sad rome files out. The past gets small, hides under back yard pines, plays dead. Wonder where the ford broke its heart. Here some indians, there some settlers, in between, a river of perfume. So much for the trees.

Seeing them as others, the eye finds itself in birdland, lost, a masterpiece. And the desert squirrels on home to where you left it but can't go back for it. The ouch of pleasure, miffed by messy leaves. Here we shine for miles of forest.

Her rushes like ten arms invade the english ladies' gentlemen's hole agreement. Wandering amid vacationing boulders.

THE FORTUNE TELLER

You can enjoy the body. You can enjoy the vision of particulars as well, creeping inward through your peeping outward, like a snake into home room. You may obtain prompt, accurate motion from your muscles, and, with practice, can desire your bones to point the way they do. With practice! It grows on trees, you can't waste it! Your spending it *is* it! Practical!

There is information waiting when you open your mouth to lull the dog, or when you wake up inside the house again. And when you think, in the influence of gravity, sinking and rising at the same time, then there's a big kiss forming as you form your lips. So the time is now! The pattern of a lifetime! How meaning flies, roots, okays your next step! Shape! Congratulations.

RANT

You're it. The scene is set. More prizes. By this time everyone had a claim out,
their vectors shaved the fuzz off

natura. You're it. The tightrope of feeling, neurotic grooming, preparing to prepare, nature feeds you. The explosion was extraordinarily you and I said, if ever a tree was yellow,

if ever a private automaton invaded the sky, the prairie's Paris, a sign to leap from the grave as pure behavior, then you're tagged hard and boom goes the skin of thought, wind is the ally, not air.

WE SEE

In the universities, in the supermarkets, in the language, everywhere society is spoken, we see people unable to dress themselves in human proportion, we see them fooled into cannibalism by sweet talk, we see them drawling on the beach, looking each other over, looking for fingerprints, yet at the same time they are clinically unable to identify their own assholes in a series of simple political mugshots, we see them irritated, searching . . .

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Everyone keeps shouting in my ears. But rest assured, dear papa, that these are my very own sentiments and have not been borrowed from anyone.

Has the reader ever been madly in love? One does not load up on odds & ends on the chance of their proving useful. The utmost reduction compatible with efficiency is the first & last thing to aim at.

But I am putting off for too long a necessary statement. My mother was a charming woman and I was in love with her. One night, when by chance I had been put to sleep on the floor of her room on a mattress, this woman, agile as a deer, bounded over my mattress to reach her bed more quickly.

In loving her at the age of six (a charming place with handsome horses) I had exactly the same character as now, crusts & air spaces in layers. Bitterly cold wind & low drift. The surface terribly soft. My way of starting on the quest for happiness has not changed at all, with this sole exception: that in what constitutes the physical side of love (it froze hard within a very short time) I was what Caesar would be, with regard to cannon & small arms. I would soon have learned, and it would have changed nothing essential in my tactics. I wanted to cover my mother with kisses, and for her to have no clothes on. It was quite usual to feel one side of the face getting sunburned while the other was being frozen. A journey of this kind is no joke.

I abhorred my father. He brought with him memories of how it feels to be intensely, fiercely hungry. He came and interrupted our kisses. Be so good as to remember that I lost her, in childbed, when I was barely seven. You will easily conceive what I have had to bear—what courage and fortitude I have needed as things grew steadily worse between the depots. He came and interrupted our kisses. During the period from November fifteen to February twenty-three, he had but one full meal, and that on Christmas day. Even then he did not keep the sense of repletion for long: within an hour he was as hungry as ever.

I always wanted to give them to her on her bosom. Be so good as to remember that I lost her, in childbed, when I was barely seven. She was plump and looked forward to each meal with keen anticipation and an