

transitional moment in the modern period. The phenomenological reduction, the oral impulse, the open or anti-Aristotelian form, the rhythms of breathing: these, which were more or less marginal in the heyday of twentieth-century modernism, are now defining dimensions of the contemporary imagination. And we're almost into the twenty-first.

I also appreciate your comments about the "Dialogue" with David Ignatow. I understand your reservations about the format, the stiffness of which (especially on my part) makes me feel uneasy too. Perhaps on another occasion it might be better to begin with one rather than several questions as a means of activating the explorative dialogic process. Despite my uneasiness about the "written" format, however, I do believe that we come closer to authentic dialogue in it than most interviews in the oral format, in which the questioner is simply a *means* to trigger off-the-cuff comments on extremely difficult issues. In these it's usually not the *idea* or issue in question but the *image* of the person questioned that's the center of hermeneutic concern. The interview, in other words, becomes a monologue. And because of this failure of *dialogue*, the image generated is — must be — fundamentally inauthentic. Nothing is called into question. At least that's the distinct impression I've gotten from most of the interviews I've read.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Bill

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to William Spanos (Binghamton),
December 17, 1974.*

Dear Bill: It seems to me that your second letter really confuses a few of the issues of my criticism with my fundamental rejection of Heidegger, and they have very little to do with each other. So I think I should try to clarify this a bit, though I'm really more interested in the issue of Heidegger than in going over, what is for me, old ground.

About "collage" — I never used it to characterize a "postmodern impulse". It is the characteristic strategy, or rather tactic, of early 20th century modernism. And to the extent that poets I would suppose share "postmodern impulses" tend to employ some form of it, that is the extent to which they maintain a real connection with some of the impulses of earlier modernism. I don't think there is anything unusual about this. It doesn't diminish the work of Olson, or the earlier Ashbery, or Jerome Rothenberg, or Jackson Mac Low, or for that matter the work of Godard and Resnais, that they have continued to be able to develop and transform this methodology. And it's also important to understand that collage as they employ it or employed it has nothing to do with "spatial models". After all we're not talking about *papiers collés* (arrangements of pasted down paper), we're talking about *collage*, which is an organizational

principle that thoroughly radicalized *modern* art. This is the notion of putting or bringing together things and pieces of things, of splicing and superimposing, whatever. It's main force derives from its avoidance or rejection of conventional syntaxes, which in the temporal arts usually mean something like conventional narration, and in the plastic ones, iconic representation. It's origins are Cubist (look at John Golding's book on *Cubism*, especially the section dealing with Picasso, Braque and Gris between 1912 and 1914; and you could look at Seitz on *Assemblage*):

The invention of collage struck the most violent blow yet at traditional painting, and particularly at the idealized and romantic conception of the 'work of art' as the expression not only of technical skill but also almost of some absolute beauty. Now the Cubist painters were constructing works of art from odd bits of material — one might almost say from bits of rubbish — generally considered to have no esthetic value, and not even to serve any good or useful purpose. . . . Sabartes quotes Picasso as saying "we sought to express reality with materials we did not know how to handle, and which we prized precisely because we knew their help was not indispensable to us, that they were neither the best nor the most adequate." (Golding pp. 103-4)

Maurice Raynal in his article on collage in the *Section D'Or of 1912* pointed out that the artists' motivation toward collage had a lot to do with their distaste for photographic illusionism in painting (iconic representation) and that they preferred to substitute for a "copy" of an object a piece of the object itself. The implications of collage here consist of a drive toward a more radical kind of reference through probabilistic metonymies and synecdoches, through exemplification and so on. It also involves a strong inclination toward casualness of organization and matter — the use of clichés, junk whatever. It is not a "spatial" concern, not exclusively or primarily. And it was even more radicalized by the Dada and Futurist performance artists, the music concrete people, the experimental film-makers and the poets. If the outcome in two dimensional media looks as if the artist's concerns are fundamentally spatial it is only because the radical impulses of collage have often been interpreted trivially by many pleasant academic artists. The "two dimensions" of painting and "three dimensions" of sculpture are merely staging areas, theaters of operation, in which the assertion of two dimensionality or three dimensionality are themselves often special metonymies for notions of "literal reality" or "physical reality" or the "domain of art" or whatever in the various cases. Surely the sense of physical reality can't strike you as less primary or urgent than the notion of "temporality". I don't think the sense of the physical or even of presentness (whatever that is or however we should

describe it or name it) follows a notion of time, except in a very abstract sense. And in that sense the notion of temporality and the notion of presentness would appear to be apprehended together, like the simultaneous apprehension of figure and ground. I have nothing against the notion of space as an apprehension of "presentness" — or "immediacy" if you like the term better. It's the notion of "form" I object to, which converts the apprehension of "space" as the immediate experience of the present into a sort of abstraction by geometricizing it. If a painting is big enough it will not be experienced as "bounded" and if it is disorganized enough it will not be experienced as "arranged". I may not be interested at the moment in painting at all, but I don't think the abstract notion of "space" is at all important in anything but academic painting.

Now let me go on. I also don't believe that "collage" is in conflict with "discourse" or even with "oral" impulses, at least not necessarily. The main feature of collage is not a spatial reference but disjunction, discontinuity, and, ordinarily, plurality of parts. To me this seems neither for or against "speech". Some terrific conversationalists are disjunctive, discontinuous and so on. At the moment I really don't think of my work in terms of collage organization. I think of my "talk pieces" as organized by my sense of "address". Talking toward some one, some others, talking also toward some undiscovered but sensed goal, toward a kind of discovery. So the idea of "collage" doesn't seem useful to me right now. I don't sense myself as putting things, pieces of things next to each other, not even successively. And so I see myself rather as "going on" however I have to "go on," which may be disjunctively — I might have to cross a river or street, scale a wall, maybe begin over again — sort of. I tend occasionally to arrive at a kind of narrative, sometimes, out of the process of going on. I don't object to it. It seems right now that what I'm doing is trying to find the sources of discourse in talking, and this situates what we used to consider the more conventional representational forms of narration and representation back in their emergent and more provisional domain, where they signify differently than in the fixed genres. This seems different. Everything here seems less disjunctive than fluid. And it seems true that many of the artists I would call postmodern — though they make no formal renunciation of collage or even of certain still valuable modernist strategies — seem tempted toward a more fluid, less disjunctive, (more natural?) way of proceeding. John Ashbery mentioned to me once — about his earlier work — that he always assumed the fragments he had cut apart would some time start to come together and that when he was doing "Clepsydra" he really wanted to do a seamless piece (that built on what he had done before) but that went right on to the end. I suppose this is true of Resnais' *Muriel*, about Jerry Rothenberg's *Poland*, and a whole host of fairly recent work.

I suppose the problem for you really resides in your intention to consider Olson "postmodern". Well, in some sense he is very firmly

attached to the modernist strategies of disjunctive collage. I tend to see him as a fundamental and radical development of a modernism that was interrupted around 1928 or 29 and never achieved its full possibilities, though various artists like Tzara, Stein and others went on working away at it in relative isolation during the 30's, or at least without great notoriety. But there was a kind of picking up of pieces and going on that happened all over after the second World War was over. Which accounts for our enormous enthusiasm for John Cage and Gertrude Stein, who stand in relation to a great paradigm, at different stages of it, but both of whom continued and radicalized the possibilities of signification in our art. But Cage is, apparently, also, at the end of something, great artist that he is. And we have to go on – and are going on – differently, very differently.

Well, I see that I've gone on at great length and I did want to address myself to the Heidegger, and I think maybe I should leave that for a second letter, because I do want to get this off to you. I will say one thing about the Heidegger here, though.

I'm quite convinced that I "hear" him, the problem is I don't believe him. What I mean is that I don't think he goes far enough at all or, rather, I don't believe that he proceeds in the way he suggests he's proceeding. The trip is all very exciting, but he keeps arriving at all the same places. Now either he's not a good traveller (which I don't believe, because this is about equivalent to saying he isn't intelligent enough about making his way onward), or, which I do believe, he's merely dissembling a trip or supposing he's travelling while thoroughly prepared for all the places he's going to arrive at, the resting places, quite well aware of what he's going "to find". I just re-read *Was heisst Denken?* and was stunned by the seductiveness of the man's way of moving as I was infuriated by what revealed itself to be an increasingly arbitrary and banal set of alternative pathways. Gradually what he comes to call "thinking" begins to prevent nearly anything interesting from appearing – or perhaps I should say "anything" rather than "anything interesting" as thinking begins to evaporate in the discourse. It has all started to attenuate the moment he chooses the pathway of

Das Bedenklichste in unserer bedenklichen
Zeit ist, dass wir noch nicht denken.

Which is not going on at all. It's something more like a Ruy Lopez, which will go on remorselessly following its well worn track. Pawn to King 4, Pawn to King 4, Knight to King Bishop 3, Knight to Queen Bishop 3. All we can hope for is that at one of the turning points that he'll choose a slightly less acceptable turn, a radical sacrifice, a dangerous pawn push. It's not much to hope for. That which requires to be thought? Really! And then it ends in a draw on the forty-fifth move. Terrific! I gave up chess about the same time I gave up Heidegger.

When I referred to his National Socialist Politics I was less concerned with the details of his membership in Hitler's party than in the politics of nostalgia. Which is rather like a board game. And about as useful. About Bob Kroetsch's comment on Socrates and Homer — well, if it's a question of talking as the speech act of the man in the situation — Socrates fits the bill more thoroughly and easily than Homer. After all, both of them are improvisers, but Socrates was a lot more of an improviser than Homer, because he was under the pressure of dialogue-conversation — arbitrary intrusions of another consciousness. I don't want you to suppose I'm claiming the superiority of one over the other, but the formulaic and narrative aspects of Homer's rap are subject in only a rather subtle way to the pressures of his audience. This is true for me, and I suppose for all poets. Yet I can't help being dazzled by Plato's image of Socrates' great interruptable inventions, admitting objections and questions, alternate structures and continuing to build with and around them. Socrates is the poet I feel closer to.

I'll let it go at this point and return to your question about the relations between my view of the "oral" tradition and Jerome's in my next letter — also perhaps in some greater detail to my objections to Heidegger — or certain kinds of Romanticism, which is about the same thing.

Best to all of you.

David

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to William Spanos (Binghamton),
January 1, 1975.*

Dear Bill: I've been looking at your last letter — particularly your formulation of the differences between Jerome and myself in our attitudes toward the "oral tradition" and I'd like to try to clarify what I think the situation is.

Given your own existential concerns, which may be a little biasing, I think your appraisal of me is pretty reasonable. I'm a secularist. I don't give a damn about religion, I don't care about myth, and the idea of ritual leaves me cold. I mean, when I was in college I found out that I really liked the taste of cigarettes and I decided to take up smoking. So every week I used to buy myself a pack of Gaulois, with the intention of smoking them seriously. Maybe Monday morning I'd have one at breakfast over coffee, and then maybe another one at lunch. But then I'd forget to take one during a conversational coffee break in the afternoon, and I might not have another one till dinner. By Wednesday I'd leave the pack in my other shirt and remember it too late to take with me. By Thursday I'd forget that I had them at all, and by the end of the week I might have smoked five or six cigarettes and be left with a blue package of stale yellowed papers filled with loose shreds of dry tobacco that were

completely unsmokeable. So in spite of my best intentions I had to give up smoking. I'm not even good at habits. Where does that leave us?

I think that the idea of the "timeless formal patterns . . . of collective ritual expression" is ridiculous.

And I'm still interested in what most people call primitive cultures — because I think that among them are some of the great software cultures of the earth. And while I have no bias in favor of tribes and tribalism — whatever that may be — probably the tribe is a colonial construction anyway — it gave the colonizer an organization he could deal with — even if he had to construct it — I have great respect for the preference for software over hardware, which you could call a preference for intelligence over brute force. So you see, what I'm interested in in these cultures is their intelligence — their inventiveness, their tact, and their good sense.

The Australian desert people inhabit a territory where the rainfall is sporadic and sparse, but it is more sporadic than sparse. Yet it has relatively few large bodies of more or less permanent water that could outlast a dry season. The way they handled this situation . . . I shouldn't say "handled", because they didn't "handle" it, they tuned to it. Handling something is a hardware solution. You "take it in hand," "move something from here to there" by pushing or pulling or bending or breaking — it. That's not the only kind of technology. It's only what we've come to think of as technology. Brute technology. Technology of the conquerors. What you do here is dig a gaping hole in the earth and try to collect the runoff from the rainwater. And if it doesn't work, because the soil won't carry the water far enough, because you situated your reservoir in an inauspicious place, you dig another one — or else you change the slope of the land. You level hills, create new gradients, a whole new watershed — at whatever cost. This style of science never learns cost accounting — in human life or in the amount of resources it burns up for its limited success, which may not be a success anyway. The system of the Aswan dam. A kind of Vietnam war against the earth, which you may continue to lose but pretend to win anyway, because the one thing you have control of is the propaganda machine, which converts all overall failures into great images of local success. All right. This is the old science, and it's dying — but dying hard, with its fossil fuels and chemical fertilizers and bulldozers. Against that we have the native Australian system. They learn it — that the amount of water they get is enough — if they drink at the right places at the right time. It's a question of tempo. They program themselves. They begin by drinking their water at the most temporary of their waterholes. Shortly after the rains there are more of them, and they won't last too long. They preserve them as best they can from evaporation — by means of a rock roof covering — whatever. They drink these first and they work their way backward to the bigger and more permanent reservoirs only as the smaller ones dry up. For this they have to be mobile. But it is a moving

culture. The people walked around a lot. They had to — to survive. You go to the places you have to. But walking around is what you do in that culture — among other things. Walkabout. You walk along the pathways. The famous pathways, where the great ones, the intelligent ones, the ones before you, went. You may want to call this religion. Walking around where the water's been. Looking over the places where the famous things happened. Where they learned the good things. How to proceed. I suppose you could call survival a ritual. But that's not what you usually mean by it. This system, this way of going has a lot to recommend it. But mainly intelligence and tact. It has a lot of things against it, and I don't know how necessary they are or contingent. I mean the dreadful relation of the Australian native culture to women, to the young. It isn't very nice. And they knew it. Sort of. They tell how they ripped off the great sisters, how they took control — basically for the old men. It puts a great premium on experience. Age. Which is only worth something if experience repeats itself. If the world (the earth) stays the same, and the animals keep coming and the rain. I'm not offering any briefs for any particular so-called primitive culture as such. They're all in disarray now anyway. After what we've done to the earth it may be very hard to work out a way to live on it. The particular knowledges of old wisdoms may not help us anymore. Most of these cultures didn't react too well to crises. Or at least it doesn't seem so. It's the intelligences, not their knowledges, we may have to learn from. How to proceed without shoving anything we don't have to.

I was working once as an editor for a scientific publishing company and we published in English translation the Soviet Bulletin of Biology and Medicine; and I remember an experiment conducted by some Russian scientist to determine to what extent oxygen deprivation will inhibit the development of tuberculosis infection. To determine this the scientist inoculated several hundred mice and suffocated them in a sealed tube, to compare them with several hundred other mice similarly infected and executed differently — to serve as a control group. This is the science of a Cossack, and I suspect that many of my university colleagues will laugh with me at its vulgarity and crudity. But all they have to do is walk across the campus to their own Medical Building to find a junkyard of animal bodies "sacrificed" to a trivial and gross inquiry that could be conducted in n other ways if intelligence and tact were substituted for an institutionalized and mindless violence. The point is that we have to go from a science of pushing to a science of tuning. Becoming wary of hardware, which is often a storage problem or a garbage disposal problem.

And a literary tradition — a literal tradition — is part of a hardware system and it has a great disposal problem. I mean it's all right to put up preserves — if you think you'll need to eat them, but they're not necessarily time capsules. And the conversion you need to transform food into preserves — the processes, the preservatives — may reduce the food to a ghost of itself. Frozen food. Birdseye peas. That may not last till you

need them — the time that may never come, and you may not even care, because you've forgotten that there was such a thing as real vegetables after all. What is it Olson said about fishsticks? Still, I'm not a sentimentalist — I can see the point of freezing food, or canning or smoking it, but the point lies in retrieving what's been canned, frozen or smoked. And a taste for "literature" is like a taste for lox. Okay, but a little exotic. I like it. But you can't live on it. Now a lot of what's gone down as art in the West is pretty exotic, and the role of the tradition — the Western tradition imagined say by someone like Harold Bloom — is something like a continuous promotion for the food processing industry, which will tell you of the terrific virtues of BHA, monosodium glutamate, enriched white flour. . . .

NO, Jerry isn't interested in "timeless formal patterns." He's interested in the recurrence of good sense, of energy, wherever people address themselves through language to the things that make them human or, better than that, to the things that make them part of the living community of the earth or the solar system. What we've been calling myth and ritual, or even religion in a lot of cases has no relation to what those crazy Christians would mean by those terms.

I hope this addresses what you had in mind.

Best,
David

*William V. Spanos (Binghamton) to David Antin (Solana Beach),
January 15, 1975.*

Dear David: . . . The Rothenberg "interview" is almost done. Economou's essay will be done on time he says. . . . So we're in business. In fact, I think the issue should be very exciting, not only for what it's got in it, but for the way it got there.

While I'm at it, let me pose my last question to you in response to your most recent letter. I can agree with you that Jerry is committed to the same kind of "ecological" values as those you articulate so movingly in your letter. But you don't really confront my distinction — at least not directly. There's a significant "formal" difference between the kind of poems Jerry writes and likes and your talk-poems. Doesn't that formal difference imply a significant epistemological difference?

As ever,
Bill

P.S. I can't quite tell from your last letter how you interpret my attitude towards these matters. For the record, therefore, I do want to insist that I have *no* quarrel with your compelling assault on the ecology of the Western "literary" tradition. (My essay, "The Detective and the Boundary," in *boundary 2* 1/1, should make that clear.) You reject

Mastery in favor of generosity — Manipulating the “world” as if it were an object in favor of letting it be. Or, as Charles Olson puts it for us:

And what is the message? The message is
a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable
events distributed in time

is the birth of air, is
the birth of water, is
a state between
the origin and
the end, between
birth and the beginning of
another fetid nest

is change, presents
no more than itself

And the too strong grasping of it,
when it is pressed together and condensed,
loses it

This very thing you are

On the subject of Western hardware, I would only refer you to Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” and, above all, to an absolutely related essay from *Holzwege*, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes” (the pun in the title of which suggests in what sense ours is the time of the triumph of technology). Where I think, we disagree or at least have different emphases is in what we mean by “generosity.” I want to ground it more than you do in temporal existence/history/the tensions of (dialogic) encounter.

*David Antin (Solana Beach) to William Spanos (Binghamton),
January 30, 1975.*

Dear Bill: Here’s your letter dated June 21, 1974 (the xerox doesn’t show the date). The letter is significant because my response to Heidegger was in great degree triggered by your question “If Being isn’t a presence in the process, what’s the point?” It started me out rereading Heidegger and realizing I felt quite hostile to him, and more hostile the more I read. But the disagreement here is not so much between you and me, as it is a disagreement about the implications of Heidegger. I was rather well aware from your piece in *boundary 2* No. 1 of your own critical attitude toward the ecology of Western culture. And I was addressing my sense of our agreement in my attack on Heidegger, whose sense of nostalgia makes him

I believe a dangerous friend. But I've made myself clear on that before, as clear as necessary at this time anyway, and the whole issue is hardly worth going over again.

But I did want to address myself to your last comments on Jerry and me. You point to a difference between us — which is certainly real enough and I don't want to give the impression of minimizing it. You call it a "formal" difference, and I'd prefer to avoid that term, with its implications of "form" as a kind of "mouldedness" which I've been rejecting all along. I'd rather speak of it as a difference of aspect, of inclination or stance. And you're right to insist on it. It's very evident, perhaps too evident, and easy to exaggerate the implications of. So I've tended to emphasize the connections that unite us, which are also real and significant, though not so evident to others, but perhaps more significant to us. And I think you're right to see the difference emerging from a difference of "epistemology", especially if you think of epistemology as rooted in experience and not as a technical term of a frozen philosophical tradition. *ἑπίσταμαι* in Homer is to know how to proceed, to be skilled (in something) to know how (to work at it, how to go on). To believe the wood is so, the world is so, as much as we believe — Jerry and I — is not more than a way of working, or rather setting out to work — with some expectations that the grain runs — more or less — in a particular way with a particular habit — to have a habit of the hand that reaches out to handle things, matters, in a particular way because we reach — each of us — from a particular place with a particular hand toward the place we expect them to be, and where we are not dreadfully disappointed when they turn out not to be — exactly — there. Now Jerry and I move differently. I have a tendency to try to move straight forward — to start that way — but because there's often something of a wall in the way I'll often wind up moving sideways along it, but facing more or less in the direction I think I have to go, looking for an opening to get through. And I suspect Jerry of moving toward a similar place but starting out by walking backwards. Moving away from the things that he's leaving, because they turn out to be useless, or because they're valuable but he can't take them with him, or are maybe leaving him anyway and are only confusing, but keeping his eyes on them while backing toward the new terrain, which I suppose he only sees directly when it joins the rest behind him. Maybe because in his experience you can't approach anything directly and expect it to be there when you arrive. So he steps backward watching out and hoping — with caution and good luck — to fall through the right hole. If we get there, we get there different ways. But we have different bodies — of experience and doctrine — that lead to a different perception and habit. Look — a long time ago when we were in college we got summer jobs working for the Forestry Department in Idaho and we were going to set out hitchhiking together across the country. Now he'd never been across the country before and I was more experienced, and his family thought I