

read a shorter poem by this author press 23. To read a longer poem press 24. To read a better poem press 25. To read an on-line version of this poem press 26. To repeat this menu press 27. To read a commentary on these commands and a critical discussion of the social phenomenon of interpellation press 28. To read a commentary on these commands and their relation to Vico's cyclical theory of history press 29. To read a comparison of this touch-tone method to John Dee's Enochian tables press 30. For more information on John Dee's Enochian Tables press 31. To read factual information about John Dee press 32. To read information on Enoch press 33.

2010

Bob Perelman

b. 1947

Bob Perelman was born in Youngstown, Ohio, and attended the University of Michigan, where he received a B.A. in English and an M.A. in classics, and the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. In 1975, he moved to San Francisco, where he edited the magazine *Hills* and was centrally involved in the growing language poetry scene. From 1977 to 1981, he founded and curated the important San Francisco Talk Series, located primarily at the Langton Street Gallery, and edited *Writing/Talks* (1985), a collection of talks and writings from the series. The "talks" consisted of a presentation by a poet, during which the audience responded with its own thoughts.

Of the language poets, Perelman is one of the more overtly political in his view of consumer society. His satirical approach to the politics of language is also evident in his talks and essays. Quoting the linguist Noam Chomsky, Perelman writes, "Question: How do you tell a language from a dialect? Answer: A language is a dialect that has an army and a navy."¹

Perelman holds that, just as Virgil's *The Aeneid* justifies empire, much contemporary poetry exists for "a sort of Monday-morning Emperor," the bourgeois reader, who can feel "in the exquisitely disposed syllables, the pain of repression that comes with the territory of world dominion."² Perelman calls instead for a "defamiliarization" of poetry by removing it from the comforting aegis of the oral: "Unlike the oral poet, who is reinforcing what the community already knows, the didactic *writer* will always have something new, and, possibly, unacceptable to get across."³

Perelman's poetry books include *Braille* (1975), *7 Works* (1978), *Primer* (1981), *a.k.a.* (1984), *The First World* (1986), *Face Value* (1988), the ambitious long poem *Captive Audience* (1988), *Virtual Reality* (1993), *Ten to One: Selected Poems* (1999), *Playing Bodies* (with artist Francie Shaw, 2003), and *IFLIFE* (2006). He has also written the critical studies *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky* (1994), and *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (1996).

He lives in Philadelphia and teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

1. "Words Detached from the Old Song and Dance," in *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, ed. Michael Palmer, Berkeley, 1983, p. 224. 2. The same, p. 232. 3. The same, p. 233.

Chronic Meanings

The single fact is matter.
 Five words can say only.
 Black sky at night, reasonably.
 I am, the irrational residue.

Blown up chain link fence.
 Next morning stronger than ever.
 Midnight the pain is almost.
 The train seems practically expressive.

A story familiar as a.
 Society has broken into bands.
 The nineteenth century was sure.
 Characters in the withering capital.

The heroic figure straddled the.
 The clouds enveloped the tallest.
 Tens of thousands of drops.
 The monster struggled with Milton.

On our wedding night I.
 The sorrow burned deeper than.
 Grimly I pursued what violence.
 A trap, a catch, a.

Fans stand up, yelling their.
 Lights go off in houses.
 A fictional look, not quite.
 To be able to talk.

The coffee sounds intriguing but.
 She put her cards on.
 What had been comfortable subjectivity.
 The lesson we can each.

Not enough time to thoroughly.
 Structure announces structure and takes.
 He caught his breath in.
 The vista disclosed no immediate.

Alone with a pun in.
 The clock face and the.
 Rock of ages, a modern.
 I think I had better.

Now this particular mall seemed.
 The bag of groceries had.
 Whether a biographical junkheap or.
 In no sense do I.

These fields make me feel.
 Mount Rushmore in a sonnet.
 Some in the party tried.
 So it's not as if.

That always happened until one.
 She spread her arms and.
 The sky if anything grew.
 Which left a lot of.

No one could help it.
 I ran farther than I.
 That wasn't a good one.
 Now put down your pencils.

They won't pull that over.
 Standing up to the Empire.
 Stop it, screaming in a.
 The smell of pine needles.

Economics is not my strong.
 Until one of us reads.
 I took a breath, then.
 The singular heroic vision, unilaterally.

Voices imitate the very words.
 Bed was one place where.
 A personal life, a toaster.
 Memorized experience can't be completely.

The impossibility of the simplest.
 So shut the fucking thing.

Now I've gone and put.
But that makes the world.

The point I am trying.
Like a cartoon worm on.
A physical mouth without speech.
If taken to an extreme.

The phone is for someone.
The next second it seemed.
But did that really mean.
Yet Los Angeles is full.

Naturally enough I turn to.
Some things are reversible, some.
You don't have that choice.
I'm going to Jo's for.

Now I've heard everything, he.
One time when I used.
The amount of dissatisfaction involved.
The weather isn't all it's.

You'd think people would have.
Or that they would invent.
At least if the emotional.
The presence of an illusion.

Symbiosis of home and prison.
Then, having become superfluous, time.
One has to give to.
Taste: the first and last.

I remember the look in.
It was the first time.
Some gorgeous swelling feeling that.
Success which owes its fortune.

Come what may it can't.
There are a number of.
But there is only one.
That's why I want to.

1993

Confession

Aliens have inhabited my aesthetics for
decades. Really since the early 70s.

Before that I pretty much wrote
as myself, though young. But something

has happened to my memory, my
judgment: apparently, my will has been

affected. That old stuff, the fork
in my head, first home run,

Dad falling out of the car—
I remember the words, but I

can't get back there anymore. I
think they must be screening my

sensations. I'm sure my categories have
been messed with. I look at

the anthologies in the big chains
and campus bookstores, even the small

press opium dens, all those stanzas
against that white space—they just

look like the models in the
catalogs. The models have arms and

legs and a head, the poems
mostly don't, but other than that

it's hard—for me anyway—to
tell them apart. There's the sexy

underwear poem, the sturdy workboot poem
you could wear to a party

in a pinch, the little blaspheming
dress poem. There's variety, you say:

the button-down oxford with offrhymed cuffs.
The epic toga, showing some ancient

ankle, the behold! the world is
changed and finally I'm normal flowing

robe and shorts, the full nude,
the scatter—Yes, I suppose there's

variety, but the looks, those come
on and read me for the

inner you I've locked onto with
my cultural capital sensing device looks!

No thanks, Jay Peterman! No thanks,
"Ordinary Evening in New Haven"! I'm

just waiting for my return ticket
to have any meaning, for those

saucer-shaped clouds to lower! The authorities
deny any visitations—hardly a surprise.

And I myself deny them—think
about it. What could motivate a

group of egg-headed, tentacled, slimier-than-thou aestheticians
with techniques far beyond ours to

visit earth, abduct naive poets, and
inculcate them with otherworldly forms that

are also, if you believe the
tabloids, salacious? And these abductions always

seem to take place in some
provincial setting: isn't that more than

slightly suspicious? Why don't they ever
reveal themselves hovering over some New

York publishing venue? It would be
nice to get some answers here—

we might learn something, about poetry
if nothing else, but I'm not

much help, since I'm an abductee,
at least in theory, though, like

I say, I don't remember much.
But this writing seems pretty normal:

complete sentences; semicolons; yada yada. I
seem to have lost my avant-garde

card in the laundry. They say
that's typical. Well, you'll just have

to use your judgment, earthlings! Judgment,
that's your job! Back to work!

As if you could leave! And
you thought gravity was a problem!

1999

Current Poetics

Going into Iraqi refugees was the last thing on most investors' minds
but suddenly that was where all the money had gone
First thing anybody knew the sun had really set, gone down for good

It has the unbearable presence of a bad dream
a monster telethon where the mute isn't working
except you can feel pain too

Bad preaching and worse theology
with porn the only commodity still behaving itself
a marriage everyone should have seen coming

While somewhere in the extreme back yard
the fastest most expensive machines are rattling the cage of the enemy nation state
de jour
even as your own is being rattled

The tidal throughway from a distance
dispersing everything sloppy, anything
resembling an excessive spell. All that's left
is lambent, like lakes. One misses
the remarkable detail of continuity.
Light devours the visible world.
A slack windsock, sole identified sequence.

The garrulous landscape is stoked
and synoptic; the synonym list
is doggedly on plot, gleaming
in the sunlight, husbanded with enchantment.
The glass on the way down flowers. I did
or am doing in common speech fully informed,
unafraid of repetition in the same person.

Bob Perelman

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, if he came back to earth, 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 to endure calmly as things grew steadily worse between the depots. He came and interrupted our kisses. During the period from November fifteen to February twentythree, 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 exquisite freshness, but the food seemed to disappear without making her any the less ravenous. The evening meal was pretty, only it froze hard in a very short time.

My father became rather primitive when he was hungry—weakened, hopeless, spiritless; but my mother had an expression of perfect serenity, and, to conclude, she often used to read the *Divine Comedy* of Dante through in the original. Long afterwards, I found five or six different editions in her room which had remained shut up.

We could not joke about food. My aunt dared reproach me with not weeping enough! You can imagine my suffering, and what I felt! Besides, she took no part in love. She thought about it most of the time, and she used to talk about it, but always in the most serious manner possible. As for me, it was with strange feelings that I was 'as criminal as possible.'

I did not experience really severe hunger until I was much too preoccupied with the heavy and dangerous to be able to talk much. Those were silent days. I had been the first to be horrified by the sounds which I had produced. I would get up at 5 A.M. in order to make a start at 7 A.M., and would eat my scanty breakfast that only seemed to accentuate hunger. Then I would describe things in the good days to come.

The 'Wild Roll' was to be the high water mark of luxury. My hand refuses to write. I have been pacing around for a quarter of an hour. If I reduced myself to reasonable limits, I would be unjust to the frenzy of happiness, the excess of happiness. . . . The only civilized experience that is akin to it is when one steps unknowingly on the pavement.

Her room remained closed for ten years after her death. No servants entered it. I alone had the key. My father was severely reprimanded. The moisture on his clothes froze hard. He sold them to build his new street and other follies. This ruined him.

"Now we are on board ship," he would say. "We wake up in a bunk, and the first thing we do is to stretch out our hands and get some chocolate, some Garibaldi biscuits, and some apples. We eat those in the bunk, and then we get up for breakfast. Breakfast will be at eight o'clock, and we will have porridge, fish, bacon and eggs. . . ." His eyes were sparkling with rage. ". . . cold ham, plum pudding, sweets, fresh roll and butter, marmalade

and coffee. At eleven o'clock we will have hot cocoa, open jam tarts, fried cods' roe, and slices of heavy plum cake. That will be all until one o'clock. Nothing can prevent madness."

Here I interrupted him. I said I was never in such a good humor when I was quite unknown. I complained to him of being appallingly hungry, of tragic dreams of getting food to eat, but of never having the satisfaction of dreaming that I was actually eating. Last night I did taste bread and butter. He laughed. "I assumed," he said, "that you would be guided by your common sense and that you would have had more confidence in your father's judgment which you know is so sound, than in your own futile wishes. For lunch we will have Wild Roll, shepherd's pie, fresh baked soda-bread, hot milk treacle, pudding, nuts, raisins, and cake. After that we will turn in for a sleep, and we will be called at 3:45, when we will reach out again from the bunks and have doughnuts and sweets. We will get up then and have big cups of tea, and fresh cakes and chocolate creams. Dinner will be at six, and we will have thick soup, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, cauliflower, peas, asparagus, plum pudding, fruit, apple pie with thick cream, scones and butter, port wine, nuts, and almonds and raisins."

He raised his forefinger. "These seemingly trivial matters may often bring success, honor, and wealth, or, on the other hand, disgrace. At midnight we will have a really big meal, just before we go to bed. There will be melon, grilled trout and butter sauce, roast chicken with plenty of livers, and a proper salad with eggs and very thick dressing, green peas and new potatoes, a saddle of mutton, fried suet pudding, peaches à la Melba, egg curry, plum pudding and sauce, celery, fruit, nuts, port wine, milk, and cocoa. Then we will go to bed and sleep until breakfast. We will have chocolate and biscuits under our pillows, and if we want anything to eat during the night we will just have to get it. Trust no one! Keep your medicines! Go to bed early! Do not catch cold! Perspire a little every morning! Be careful in your diet! Good night!"

I spent my life with my grandfather. The dangers I did know were preferable to those I did not know.

By the painful process of forcing my eyelids apart with my fingers I was able to see a little, but the pain was severe. I endured six hours of agony, ending in a good long sleep, from which I awoke much refreshed. By midnight I was walking to the rookery, where I had great fun with the birds.

MY ONE VOICE

At the sound of my voice
I spoke and, egged on
By the discrepancy, wrote
The rest out as poetry.

Read the books, duets
From nowhere say they speak;
Why not let them. Habitual stares
Leave trees in rearview mirrors.

I came from a neutral point
In space, far from the inside
Of any one head. O say can I
Still see the tabula rasa outshining

That rosy dawn on the near side
Of the genetic code. Doubt,
Thy name is certainty. Generations
Of recordings of the sunrise

Picture the light until the page
Is white and I predict
The present, hearing a future
In the syllables' erasing fade.

GOD

Ay chinga!
Bright sun shines.
God appears.
Down in front!

I want to put
This word here.
The mind at
Its shuffle.

I want to
Hear this word.
Dull person,
Fish fish, water.