

Nada Gordon

Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

"The New Life," with renderings of Bernadette Mayer © 1997 by



Gary Sullivan (first appeared in *Raintaxi*)

Disclaimer: This thesis was written, although not without passionate attention, as an *academic requirement* in 1986, in my early twenties. If I were to revise it now I would make it less simple in its analyses of the literary milieu, history and texts treated therein. The clarity of my comments is not equal to the complexity of the subject, I guess. Now, however, embroiled in a plethora of other projects, and characteristically quite lacking in patience, I shan't revise this. I humbly beg the indulgence of the reader.

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Introduction

An organization is an open system, an entity composed of many independent parts inexorably intertwined with the outside world.

--- Mescon, Albert, Khedouri
Management: Individual and Organization Effectiveness
(Harper & Row, NY) p. 69

Writing is the most ridiculous thing to do. Now you do it out of desire, now not. Who knows what it felt like in other times. To write and write, someone says write a sensible thing, some other a commercial. One is dead like the dead. We write and write thinking it's better than watching t.v. to attack the typewriter with love and anger faster to say all of memory and being, maybe it doesn't exist.

Why write? There is no single answer. One writer I know says he writes to leave a trace of his subjectivity. Another says she wants her writing to serve as a critical lever in the world. Another wants to become someone else, and still another wants to discover the mechanisms of his perception and memory, through writing. All of these motivations signal attempts to build bridges from the individual subject to the external world; in some, like "discovering the mechanisms of perception," the primary device might be mimesis, while in others, like "becoming someone else," the primary device might be imagination. But no matter how the motivations differ, they are alike in that they are mediations from person to world (or in some cases, as with certain chance procedures or muse- or prophet-inspired writing, from world to person).

As such, writing (by which term I mean, in this limited context, *composition*; this could be in materials other than language) is very much a process of negotiation -- not, I would think, the solid object it is perceived as once printed and bound. For no matter how tangible, a book always needs a living mind to activate it. The literary canon grants us a wall of solid objects so mighty and musty we sometimes forget that the works contained therein are records of just such negotiations between real people and real life / historical situations, fixed and removed though these objects seem. Canon-space is, of course, limited -- who knows what works have passed through the alimentary canal of history? -- and so the canon excludes. My (admittedly naive) hope is that one day the canon will be so inclusive that it won't exist as such anymore, so that all verbal messages might be considered objects of literary study -- really, the study of meaning itself. My intention in undertaking this project is to begin to expand the canon by exploring the works of an uncanonized writer -- Bernadette Mayer, whose attitude toward the canon might be best summarized in this statement of hers: "Work your ass off to change the language & don't ever get famous."

Bernadette Mayer is a prolific and innovative writer of whom very few people in the academic community (students and teachers alike) have heard. There are three possible reasons why this should be so: 1) She is a woman. 2) She is alive. 3) The forms in which she has elected to write are dense, colloquial, fluid, difficult, and radically different from what generally makes it into the mainstream literary marketplace. Yet they are not without forebears. Mayer's work, at least in terms of volubility, playfulness, risk, and depth of intention, can be compared to Joyce, Williams, Proust, and, especially, Stein. Why then doesn't her work (and the work of her artistic contemporaries) appear on university reading lists? It's largely a question of distribution. Many students of literature have no concept of the existence -- not to mention the plethora -- of volumes generated by the small presses of this country, while at the same time they delight in reading and discussing the very latest notions in contemporary theory. Contemporary criticism has in fact had a tremendous impact on the work of contemporary non-

expository writers, but theorists, like English majors, remain blind (perhaps deliberately) to recent writing.

Some of those who are deliberately blind say that they feel overwhelmed by the sheer mass of words in print now in existence, but such a sensation of saturation is really a fact of the culture itself. I believe I state the horribly obvious when I declare that in our time we make history at high speeds. We are trained in modernity to demand the latest model, the latest development, the latest information. But the vanguard is not worthy of attention simply because it's the latest, signifying that it's the endpoint of a specific trend, but because it's most closely linked to a progressive phenomenon of which we are a part: the constantly unfolding present moment, which contains all past moments in its wake.

Among Berkeley graduate students I frequently encountered an attitude I found disturbing: a fear of non-expository writing, especially but not exclusively of the difficult and modern sort. A typical dialogue went as follows: Me: "Do you write?" Sometimes the student would sarcastically reply "Doesn't everybody ..." but more often he or she would say "Oh no ... I couldn't. I used to scribble, but ..." I was reminded of the child who won't sing because someone has told her she's tone-deaf. These students in the throes of writing-paralysis, surrounded as they are with brilliant evidence of literary "bridges," must feel tremendously frustrated to feel they don't have the permission to perform such negotiations with the world. So they become scientists of the unascertainable, and ally themselves with other scientists -- especially experts -- rather than with specimens. The specimen is a slimy excrescence of the sloppy chaotic world that sends out too many messages. It needs to be rationalized into a logical order. The specimen as other generates fear in the scientist ("Language is a virus" -- William Burroughs). I saw many students afraid to face an unfamiliar or non-critical text without the mediation of a critic or a programmatic critical vocabulary. I heard one professor yell "LOOK AT THE TEXT!"

Oddly enough, I came from an opposite environment -- the Creative Writing program at San Francisco State University -- which I found equally disturbing for the opposite reason. There the word "theory" acquired a dark, oppressive meaning; one was an "egghead" or an "academic" if one dared to talk or think conceptually about writing. As a result, the writing this institution fostered sometimes suffered from a lack of formal ingenuity and deep content, which come from study and critical reflection. My position is in the limbo between these two attitudes. I refuse both top-heavy theory without an object and a categorical fear-laden rejection of theory altogether. I hope that in the following pages I have managed to travel the road between these two extremes.

My intention for this project is to present a survey of the works of an important but overlooked contemporary experimental woman writer with a significant body of work -

- a surprisingly rare bird. Because I've chosen to write a survey, I have not been able to say anything exhaustive about any one work, nor have I sustained one grand thesis throughout. However, I hope I have managed to establish the dominant patterns and concerns in Mayer's work, to align them with the cultural currents of the last fifteen years, and to consider her peers and influences. This wide focus should not be detrimental to the works; because they are so replete with the multivalence of poetry it is reductive to say any one thing about them. I do hope, though, that by furnishing close readings of passages I have given the reader some feel for the texts themselves and ideas on how to move through them, by exploring the relationships of form and syntax to world-view and aesthetic intent. I have quoted from the works a great deal, and have reasons for doing this besides just wanting to fill the vacuum of the pages -- both in order to give the reader a sense of this not readily available work and in order not to do the work the injustice of paraphrase.

Mayer demands from her writing a formal plasticity that matches? mimics? uses? the fluidity of experience. In this she emerges from a tradition of modernist realism whose foremost aim is to capture, in Baudelaire's words, "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent." Here is an exaggerated, internalized realism -- Proust or Woolf without the scaffolding of fiction, for she focuses on the details of the quotidian. She aestheticizes her own daily life in her writing, but her writing is not diaristic because it is designed to operate in a public sphere, conscious of itself simultaneously as art and as diary: "you better start doing things, like, the diary as book -- 'the lowest form.' Everything's high or low, Germans, everything's perfect."¹ In his essay, "The Distribution of Discourse," George Steiner writes about the "fantastically loquacious world of the diary," claiming that "loquacity, copiousness and temporal duration characterize the idiolects of diary writers" -- as they do the writing of Bernadette Mayer. Also, the diary has a history as a "woman's form":

Barred from public expression of political, ideological and psychological conviction or discovery, the intelligent woman in the *ancien regime* and nineteenth century makes her journal the forum, the training ground of the mind.²

The journal form permits the integration of the process of writing into everyday life, using daily experience as the stuff of the writing, but it also permits the inclusion of otherwise ineffable material, and a way out of a repressive world.

Backdrop:

The world into which Bernadette Mayer was born was certainly restrictive. In an unpublished autobiographical work entitled *0 - 19* she describes her early life as "the big no-pleasure in everything":

Impractical I sought to be born and was idiotically raised shy so that even beyond all the time it takes to get to be a grownup human and do something, I couldn't even say anything well past that time, I couldn't speak at all. ... there was no money at all, there were fights about money, there were no fights about love, there was no ostensible love, words are pure spinach. We ate the frozen lima beans when they were cold, watching the Philco T.V. out of the corners of our punished eyes.³

Bernadette Mayer gives the factual elements of her autobiography as follows:

I was born in Ridgewood, a then mostly German place in Brooklyn in 1945 to a mother-secretary & father draft dodger WWII electrician. My older sister, Rosemary, is now a painter & sculptor. A stodgy Environment & bigoted, entirely Catholic, sexist & racist. Eisenhower-ish. My father died when I was 12, mother at my 14, & also uncle obsessive guardian at my 18, also died. Pursued the study of poetry (incl. Catholic school Greek & Latin), pursued rebelliousness, became pregnant, read Emma Goldman's autobiography & the writings of all the great ones incl. Dante & Gertrude Stein. Began to know my contemporaries too -- had both a good & intellectual time. Underwent psychoanalysis (for free). Left a beautiful anarchist lover of 10 years because he wanted no responsibility for children, I chose to have three with another, now living "alone" with them.⁴

She's also published eleven books [at the time of this writing], each inextricable from the patterns of her life and thought: *Story, Moving, Memory, Ceremony Latin 1964, Studying Hunger, Poetry, Eruditio Ex Memoria, The Golden Book of Words, Midwinter Day, Utopia* and *Mutual Aid*. From 1967 to 1969 she co-edited, with the conceptual artist Vito Acconci, a magazine of avant-garde writing entitled *0 - 9*. Since then she has also edited (from 1972-74) *Unnatural Acts*, a magazine of collaborative writing, along with Ed Friedman. From 1978-84 she co-edited, with Lewis Warsh, *United Artists* magazines and books. She's also had works published in twelve anthologies and countless magazines -- and with this last claim I hardly exaggerate.

The second generation New York School, with whom Mayer is associated, did indeed turn out dozens -- hundreds, maybe -- of mimeographed, 8 1/2" x 11" typescript magazines that are emblematic of their aesthetic. Using the materials and technology at hand, they published their works in an accessible, unpolished format, rejecting what some perceive to be the "preciousness" of small press publishing, and demanding a certain immediacy. The stapled, mimeographed magazine's political statement is to declare that the work it contains is within history, less disposable than a newspaper but not intended to hold itself up as a model for generations. This stance has admittedly made research difficult, as these materials are not available in every public library. Such difficulties are illustrated in a play of Mayer's called "Cave of Metonymy" (whose principal characters are Herman Melville, Sophia and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mabel Mercer), in which Mayer has Louis Malle say, "I find it hard to keep up with their magazines coming out so irregularly & so much of who's published where and when

depending on mood & fraternity." To which Hawthorne replies: "Yes, but they do write a lot, I mean they produce a lot of good writing, if you can follow them with it."⁵

The term "second generation New York School" refers to a group of East Coast poets that sprung up in the wake of Frank O'Hara, who died in 1966. O'Hara had found a way to be lyrical within the speed and confusion of modernity by incorporating elements from all levels of culture, all the while maintaining his grace and erudition, which showed even when he tried to be tough:

Now, come on. I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures [although he in fact did]. I hate Vachel Lindsay, always have; I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."⁶

O'Hara's grace and immediacy appealed to young urban poets who felt the academy's loftiness and dessication did not coincide with their experience of the world. O'Hara, who didn't "believe in god," granted to art, in Benjaminian fashion, the aura that he couldn't see in theology. His poems, however, are hardly rough diamonds picked up casually from the New York streets; O'Hara's skill in cutting facets is everywhere evident in his works.

Another central figure of the New York School is Ted Berrigan, who died in 1983. His subjectivity and witty inclusiveness are qualities that have been much imitated. This one of his early poems is characteristic not only of Berrigan but also of the generation of poets that would follow him:

Personal Poem #7

for John Stanton

It is 7:53 Friday morning in the Universe
New York City to be somewhat exact
I'm in my room wife gone working Gallup
fucking in the room below

had 17 1/2 milligrams desxyn
Last night 1 Milton, read Paterson, parts
1 & 2, poems by Wallace Stevens & How Much Longer
Shall I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulchre
(John Ashbery). Made lists of lines to
steal, words to look up (didn't). Had steak & eggs
with Dick while Sandy sweetly slept.

At 6:30 woke Sandy
fucked til 7 now she's late to work & I'm still
high. Guess I'll write to Bernie today
and Tom. And call Tony. And go out at 9 (with Dick)
to steal books to sell, so we can go
to see A NIGHT AT THE OPERA⁷

The poem opens with what is linguistically the most subjective of statements (underscored, of course, by the title): a specific time and place in the present tense. "It is 7:53 ... I'm in my room," creates a real, unreplaceable speaker located in time and space, quite as the proper names indicate real individuals. One might counterpose to this Stephen Spender thinking "continually of those who were truly great," with a godlike omniscient mind removed from specific earthly conditions. Berrigan's poem, on the other hand, puts us smack in the middle of these conditions, including the tiniest details of the speaker's existence: what the poet ate, what drugs the poet took, what the poet read, etc. Berrigan displays his influences as a gesture of both confession and publicity, and, in a move typical of the New York School, veils his knowledge in a quotidian tone in order to set himself up against the prevailing academics.

An important peer of Mayer's is Clark Coolidge, a solitary writer not really affiliated with any one school. A former jazz drummer and geologist, influenced by Kerouac, he writes both verse and prose with a special emphasis on rhythm and sound quality -- never "divorced from" or "at the expense of" content, but rather creating a kind of meaning music -- more than *zaum* (transrational language composed of vocables) and less (or more) than explanation. Author of several books, Coolidge dedicated a book of poems, *Own Face*, to Bernadette Mayer. Even this short verse should serve to give a feeling for his style:

The Icing Up It Turns To

When, meaning where, will the wire go down,
meaning would, beneath the portion of tree,
substitute cracking, effected by the lower
portion, mod, of the sprung cloud, signifying
an uncompleted lace or lack of power.
A lash of wisdom for the bending.⁸

Mayer's works show a similar freedom in regard to diction and rhythm; they also display many of the qualities evident in the works of Berrigan and O'Hara, whose literary presences dominated the city in which she was to create much of her early writing. In her work as in theirs, one finds the tendency to personal statement, the determination not to edit out seemingly "insignificant" details, the move to include the daily world in the writing.

It is important to keep in mind what the writers of the New York School were reacting to and against: the overbearing erudition and political conservatism of Eliot, the manic and fascistic demands of Pound, the squeaky-clean rhymed translations of Wilber, the recommendations of the New Critics that the poem be considered as an object-in-itself, eternal, out of time, divorceable from the conditions of the life in which it was conceived. Mayer, making gestures characteristic of the New York School, brings the text out of the library (in which she did however spend a lot of time) and into the sphere of the quotidian, while at the same time learning from her academic forbears how to manipulate verbal forms. She pulls and distorts form's effects to suit the world and mind in which she lives: her formative years are those of the early 1970s, when the liberatory dream and its resulting chaos / bliss pervaded the minds of young people. As her writing moves in to the 1980s it becomes a bastion of subjectivity in a world in which VCRs help to quell revolutionary sentiment. But more perhaps than Berrigan or O'Hara, Gertrude Stein (about whom both O'Hara and John Ashbery, also a prominent member of the first generation New York School, wrote) played the key role in the formation of Mayer's (and her female contemporaries like Alice Notley, Anne Waldman and Joanne Kyger) approach to writing. Exactly as I as a young writer look for woman writers to serve as models, so also did Mayer, but in the literary landscape of 1972 and the literary landscape of history there was what Mayer might have described as a "dearth of women"⁹:

When I was younger I couldn't understand how come there were so few women poets. People used to think you were crazy for asking this question. I mean sure, there was Sappho and Barbara Guest and Gertrude Stein and Diane di Prima, and then I learned about H.D. and Laura Riding and Huang O. Recently I came across an examination I wrote in college that said my "culture heroes" were William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and Anton Webern. I was embarrassed to read this. All the people I could find to talk to about poetry were men, which might be okay, except that I yearned for the opposite sex.¹⁰

¹ Bernadette Mayer, *Memory* (North Atlantic Books, 1975), p. 32.

² George Steiner, "The Distribution of Discourse," *On Difficulty* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 86-87.

³ Bernadette Mayer, *0 - 19*, typescript, no pagination, private collection of author.

⁴ Postcard received from Bernadette Mayer, October 1, 1986.

⁵ Bernadette Mayer, "Cave of Metonymy," *Oculist Witnesses*, no. 3 (1976), no pagination.

⁶ Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Random House, 1973), p. xiii.

7 Ted Berrigan, "Personal Poem #7," *So Going Around Cities* (Blue Wind Press, 1980), p. 78.

8 Clark Coolidge, "The Icing Up It Turns To," *Own Face* (Angel Hair, 1978), no pagination.

9 Interview with Bernadette Mayer by Ann Rower, December 18, 1984, *Bench Press Series on Art* (Bench Press, 1985), p. 1. Hereafter referred to in notes as "Rower intvw."

10 Rower intvw., p. 5.

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Story

Story, published in 1968 when Mayer was 23, shows evidence of a Steinian attention to the materiality of language; Mayer also plays with variations on themes the way Stein did in her work. Stein's oeuvre might be described as an investigation of grammatical functions: her early works explore verbs and verb tenses, particularly the dynamism of the present participle. Later, frustrated with the impossibility of making written language entirely fluid, she turns her attention to nouns. Stein defined poetry as "doing nothing but losing using refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns,"¹ in opposition to prose, which is "essentially and determinedly and vigorously not based on the noun."² Stein preferred the "vigor" of verbs and adjectives, yet her poetry is in some senses less at odds with the object-ness of language than is her prose, which finally defeats its own goal of duration by appealing to the reader's ear.

Story is an investigation into the noun "story," its meaning and its synonyms: Anecdote, Profile, Life Story, Scenario, Saga, Love Story, Fiction, Lie, etc. Within each section and from section to section, words and figures repeat, changing in their various contexts. Some seem to be taken from outside sources, but these are lost in the envelope of the work:

Lie

Orange upholstered pouf chair

Some things are still and still they show.

For example, a tree.

To cause to come into being.

Meetings fall.

There is a great thing in that of those.

The girls walk over him (he modeled them).

Enameled metal desk lamp.
Where is there one?
To originate.
News falls.
Some of these live at a great one of those and find this and that genial to them.
He arrives and wants to sleep with them.
A setting into motion of some action, process, or course, as, to begin this or that.
Laminated wood rocker, leather seat.
A tree lasts for many years.
On the side, poems fall into two categories, these and those.³

Note particularly how Mayer uses deictic terms without specific references: "These and those" or "There is a great thing in that of those." The deliberate vagueness of these terms, designed to be vessels for the reader's subjective input, stands in contrast to the descriptions of *furniture* (what the philosophy teacher will always use as an example of the tangible world). The words "fall" and "genial" reoccur throughout the text, sometimes at logically inappropriate places, always gaining new import with each new combination. Story is a brilliant work in a made-up technique, full of the conceptual energy Bernadette Mayer has sustained throughout her oeuvre.

A Note on Technique

That the process of writing (as incorporated into a life) holds sway over product (the poem considered as a constant, sterile object) in Mayer's schema is everywhere evident, but never so much as in the following piece, "Experiments," which I excerpt below:

Never listen to poets or other writers; never explain your work (communication experiments).

Set up multiple choice or fill-in-the-blanks situations & play with them considering every word an "object" with no meaning, perhaps just a sound, or, a block of meaning, meaning anything.

Experiment with theft & plagiarism in any form that occurs to you.

Write exactly as you think, as close as you can come to this, that is, put pen to paper and don't stop.

Note what happens for a few days, hours, (any space of time that has a limit you set); then look for relationships, connections, synchronicities; make something of it (writing).

Use (take, write in) a strict form and / or try to destroy it, e.g., the sestina.

Experiment with writing in every person & tense every day.

Explore possibilities of lists, puzzles, riddles, dictionaries, almanacs for language use.

Consider (do) memory experiments (sensory) in relation to writing: for example, record all sense images that remain from breakfast; study which engage you, escape you.

Write, taking off from visual projection, whether mental or mechanical, without thought to the word (in the ordinary sense, no craft). Write in the movies, etc.

Make writing experiments over a long period of time: for example, plan how much you will write on a particular work (one word?) each day, or, at what time of a particular day (noon?) or week, or, add to the work only on holidays, etc.

Work your ass off to change the language & don't ever get famous.⁴

The poet / critic Barrett Watten, in his book *Total Syntax*, criticizes this "anything goes" approach, charging that it lacks real motivation -- that it is haunted by "the spectre of 'too much possibility / not enough necessity'":

Here there is a proliferation of techniques. The over-all equivalence leads to a "state" in (real) time in which particular motives are effaced. Inspiration might be constant ... While the advantage of these techniques is their adherence to the quotidien, there is no further integration.⁵

While there may be a ring of truth (or caution) to these charges, the "adherence to the quotidien" ought not to be undervalued, especially in a world such as ours, where hours and days spent in alienated labor are "stockpiled" to be "used" later. And surely these experiments could be steps to "further integration" were they perceived exactly as *experiments* to further a writer's capabilities, quite as a musician practices scales. Musicians know that although practicing scales may efface "particular motives," the practice may be generative, as when they hear in the rote process a certain sequence of notes they hadn't thought to combine before which they can incorporate into their compositions. If inspiration were to be "constant," would that be such a bad thing? I can envision less desirable fates ...

That Mayer does have a sense of necessity about her writing should be evident in the epigraph to the next chapter.

¹ Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Beacon Press, Boston 1985), p. 231.

² Stein, *LIA*, p. 231.

3 Bernadette Mayer, *Story* (0-9 Books, 1968), no pagination.

4 Bernadette Mayer, "Experiments," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews & Charles Bernstein (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1984), pp. 80-83.

5 Barrett Watten, "The Politics of Poetry," in *Total Syntax* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 57.

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Moving

Yes there is something special about the composition of *Moving*. But maybe not what you'd expect. I set myself the task of not writing at all unless I was absolutely compelled to write. I wanted to prove to myself that writing was something. I wanted to observe the world (it was my first time living in the country) and I didn't want to write for the sake of writing. So I kept the typewriter in an unimportant place and kept no journal and just was a person and once in a while I would write something down and after three seasons of doing this Anne Waldman came to visit my reclusive house and piled up the pages and said, well I think this is an interesting work and I will publish it. Which was very nice as Gertrude Stein would say.

-- Bernadette Mayer (from a letter received 10/12/86)

I'm going to take a slightly circuitous route -- via Stein via Bergson -- into Mayer's *Moving*. Gertrude Stein's presence can be ascertained throughout Mayer's works. While Stein's position in the canon is uncertain, she's definitely found a place there, but more for her associations and persona than for her writing, which many regard as freakish or merely playful. To view Stein's work only as cloying repetition is to miss the point of her project entirely. Her primary aim, and Bernadette Mayer's, is to articulate by formal means the continuity and duration of human experience. Stein does this primarily by exploring verbs and verb tenses; Mayer injects experience into given units of time. That we can apply the word "duration" to experience at all is due to the work of Henri Bergson, who defined duration as follows:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states.¹

States of consciousness are not, he claims, separable entities, but instead blend into one another, and are in fact one constantly transforming whole. Our perception of them as

separate is merely an imposition of the language of space, which individuates and limits. In actuality, he says, consciousness is a continual penetration of the present -- which is penetrated by the past -- into the future; it is mobility itself. A problem arises when we try to express this movement in terms of abstract thought (language); the very word "abstraction" implies something removed from time. But from time's continuum nothing is removable; the true nature of it is distorted when we try to think of it in terms of space, implying not continuity, states within states, indivisible, but the linear (and thus spacial) notion of a before and after.

Ideas similar to Bergson's occur throughout Stein's commentary on her own work. William Carlos Williams seems aware of them when he says in an article on Stein that intelligent reading is:

an alertness not to let go of a possibility of movement in our fearful bedazzlement with some concrete and fixed present. The goal is to keep a beleaguered line of understanding which has movement from breaking down and becoming a hole into which we sink decoratively to rest. ... It moves as the sense wearies, remains fresh, living.²

Stein would not have dissented. She states flat out that

The business of Art ... is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present.³

And to completely express the complete actual present is to be in motion -- the motion that is duration. The "actual present" exists in opposition to what Williams calls a "concrete and fixed present" -- in Bergson's schema a logical impossibility for humans, who endure. Only objects exist in a concrete present; they do not live. As Stein knows, mobility is life, life, mobility:

The strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move against something and so that is what a generation does it shows that moving is existing.⁴

But she questions the necessity for art of even the stable object that makes the train seem mobile:

if the movement, that is any movement, is lively enough, perhaps it is possible to know that it is moving even if it is not moving against anything.⁵

Mayer, heiress to Bergsonian notions through her appreciation of Stein, titles her second book, published in 1971, *Moving*. Unlike Stein, she inserts a note of the personal and quotidian (the New York School touch) where Stein would have been more purely descriptive. Stein would also have maintained one constant form throughout the piece,

whereas *Moving* is the very antithesis of constancy; almost life, it is perhaps as close as literature can come to the mutability of life.

In shape the piece calls to mind not Stein but the "genre-less" pieces by Williams: *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All*, in which the form changes from full lines to short lines to dialogues to lists. It opens with a section of verse that serves as an elegant introduction to the deluge of language that follows. Although these lines are, for the voluble Mayer, relatively spare, they manage to convey a few of the book's primary concerns:

fear sure voice music body time listen
being part. being trapped
being part being trapped which is it ?
being trapped masculine
should you be one
should you be eight one eight
anxious⁶

The fear and anxiety here are about "being part." "Being part" has two opposite meanings: to be included or to be only a part (apart). Hence the question, "which is it?" A person is born with a sex: "trapped masculine." The conflicting demands of the world (or a literary work) that a person both conform and individuate make the subject waver between her singularity and her polymorphousness: "should you be eight one eight/ anxious."

In this section words repeat, but in cycles, changing a little each time in each new context, creating themes and variations:

Rhythm break age water searching. Rhythm age break water. Rhythm water searching.
Age water. Water break. Break water. Age searching. Rhythm water.
(p. 1)

The text here is self-aware; it behaves rhythmically, so it employs the word "rhythm." As a first page to a work, it's a rite of passage: "Break water." It's also "searching" for its form. This bit is designed to mesmerize: Mayer has artfully arranged the sounds to balance one another -- the long **a** sound in the monosyllables **age** and **break** against the two-syllable, short-voweled **water** and **rhythm**; the match of the **ch** of **searching** to the **g** of **age**; the **ing** of **searching** that propels the meaning forward, as it will in any utterance.

With lines like "the frame of a woman/ rib is a frame/ filling station" or "a truck comes out the cab cabbie/ indulgence comes out of the truck" (p. 1), a fragmented narrative begins to form. It never congeals, but simply reveals some possibilities:

at the head of the thought, a pin, a pin in the middle of
traffic, in traffic mind, a sea improve, in green, green

could improve, green will, a certain green will bend the king
a certain green will bend the king

(p. 2)

Mayer permits us to ride on "the head of the thought" of her "traffic mind." The traffic in her mind drives into ours over a bridge she's welded together. It has to be, for she's given us the power of deciding what "king" she's talking about, what a "green will" is, why there is "a pin" in the "traffic," or if in fact we want to make any interpretive decisions about these linguistic facts at all. And if we don't, we needn't then claim the work's gratuitous, for it is always rhythm and as such has the power to engage at least our aural and physical, if not our analytical, attention. Yet the work does tease the hermeneutic instinct, partly because of its placement in a literary text, and partly because of the incongruity of the combinations -- why "indulgence comes out of a truck?" We needn't attempt the impossible task of making the text's frazzled ends meet -- I doubt that Mayer wants us to perceive it as fully connected in any artificial sense -- but she does want us to think about it, and, more importantly, to move along with it, as the last bit of the first section illustrates:

move

did plow their turning did plow their turning plow
their turning plow did plow their turning plow share this

(p. 3)

As in *Story*, Mayer here makes interesting use of the deictic. I think she means not so much that we should share this work (what I am assuming **this** refers to) with others, but with her. The word "this" begins the next section and is certainly self-reflexive:

This is an epic of war fever fighting sex & starvation.
the pennies that come drifting down to the edge of the world are enough
to make us see. outside, Inside, I'm outside.

(p. 3)

"War fever fighting sex & starvation" are emblematic of the energies and conflicts in the text. The "pennies" (objects of small value but of value nonetheless) are like the fragments Mayer provides us with -- "drifting" (logically against the nature of pennies) "down to this edge of the world" (a world we perceive as having edges although we rationally know it is spherical) "are enough to make us see. outside" of our own limited perspectives, perhaps. "Inside" her moving consciousness and inside the process of writing, Mayer's also "outside," looking at what she's made. The form here has turned into a kind of prose, with fuller lines and more narrative continuity, but the margins (of the text and therefore the world) vary wildly; there is no flush right or flush left. Our biophysical reaction is greater eye movement, stress at the breaking of reading habits, a sense of unpredictability. The central question of the book is "how to design freedom"

(p. 23). As soon as we accustom ourselves to whatever form Mayer chooses, it metamorphoses. There is no certainty to the world this writing makes:

One day last week fresh in my mind
i began to write a mystery.
 then at twilight the world cracked in two.
(p. 3)

The line breaks in two exactly as the world does, as if to equate "this" with the world. Writing is characterized not as a two-dimensional object outside of time but as a living entity within (or even encompassing) time. It digests and regurgitates past moments, necessarily distorted by their ordeal. The paragraph that follows sounds like a stange subjectified rehash -- more dreamed than written -- of Raymond Chandler and Dostoevsky:

i read a book by t. as the world cracked
not like a mystery novel not like a documentary i slowly unravelled my story.
it had been a clear misty day in an old city half fallen down. the edge of the
park had no fence around it. a man came by. he murdered me. i thought
"i have a knife in my back. i am down." it was true, another man came by. he
lifted me up. they tried to solve the crime. someone suggested acting it out again.
i got up, the knife, down again.
it was like a dream. i corrected all the
mistakes that had been made the first time around. the murderer was nowhere
in sight. it was a flight from reality. i had always said when i was alive
"the revolution must take place in the sky" now that i had lost my life to it, i was
dead but i wasn't glad. the murderer skulking down a dark alley had hit upon an
idea, a dead one though, but an idea. he took a kerchief wrapped in oil &
bandaged the burn he had gotten from twisting the knife in the victim's back.
he turned to see that no one was looking. it was a darker night than the one of the
murder. he coughed. he had coughed blood. the kerchief was also soaked. it began
to rain. i had been murdered a day ago. a street cleaner who came by felt sud-
denly like he was before the cameras, a great movie, an extravaganza.
he couldn't figure out why. he felt some words come to place in his mind. his
thoughts were racing by him, all in words. looking around he found a place
for them, in the ear of the murderer. he was caught.
(p. 3)

This complex little narrative could stand on its own as a work. Incredibly imaginative, it plays with convention -- the tubercular Raskolnikovian murderer, the "clear misty [an oxymoron] day in an old city half fallen down" of the detective novel -- but it breaks the foremost rule of vulgar narrative logic (a rule which many writers have successfully broken and which theorists like Foucault, Barthes, and Blanchot challenge when they claim that writing is the death of the author): "the I of the book can not die in the book."

This writing records the murder, the obliteration, of her singular identity: "He murdered me. i thought 'i have a knife in my back. i am down.'" "I had been murdered a day ago." Even the passage itself does not have a singular identity; it does not in fact stand on its own, but is sandwiched in between the opening verse and another little narrative, unrelated to the first:

I am outside. these stories about after the revolution are sad,
the construction worker thought, there's no way to read them. the crow flies.
caws. I have it all in my mind though too, said his friend another construction worker
from the past.

(p. 3)

This "I" bleeds into the construction worker, for "construction worker" = writer, and also reader, who admits the difficulty of modern writing, "these stories about after the revolution." More commonly Mayer does not create these various foreign personae, but names herself in the writing, thus creating a persona specific to Bernadette Mayer. She names not only herself, but also the people who surround her in daily life. As we saw in Berrigan's poem, the proper name is a device popular among the New York School writers as it serves to locate the writing in particulars:

then the day after i met jonathan i was driving thru west stockbridge with a few friends
& we picked up a hitchhiker, the hitchhiker heard mary call me bernadette

(p. 3)

While these particulars may not be useful or necessary to us in and of themselves, they do have significance within the context of a literary work written both from and against the canon, and between other modes of expression: verse, fragmented narrative, scientific fact. *Moving*, determined never to be static, is a veritable catalogue or list of forms. The list technique, which Mayer uses also in later works, is the simplest way of giving order to fragments, no matter how accidental or asymmetrical. Pulled into a form, they are granted relationships and the dynamism of a body; this is truly "form's life." On its own, in a vacuum, each fact is unproductive, static. As Leibniz says in *The Monadology*,

There is no possibility of transposition within [the Monad], nor can we conceive of any internal movement which can be produce, directed, increased or diminished there within the substance, such as can take place in the case of composites where a change can occur among the parts.⁷

Within the context of a composition, details, which when isolated are mere shards of experience, combine to produce insight. Bergson formulates this process as follows:

Many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where an intuition may be seized.⁸

This statement might also serve as a description of the mechanism of the detective novel, in which each seemingly disparate clue adds up to a final revelatory gesture. The final work forms a whole not as a thematic or formal organicity but as an entire gesture whose smaller movements add up to a statement about the nature of the gesture (writing) itself. In *Moving*, Mayer presents a world whose objects are not just connected to it but parts of it -- not *apart* but *a part*. As the human being is to the ecosystem, so here is the text to a human life, and so are the details of a text to its entire constitution. Mayer sets forth these ideas in a quasi-authoritative tone of scientific fact -- colored by her unique perceptions:

We as human beings are not isolated systems. we take in food and information. the food we take in makes us part of the world which produces it & part of that work. we take in information thru our senses & we are able to act on it. sooner or later we will probably die & so will the universe. maybe then the world will be reduced to one big temperature equilibrium in which nothing new will ever really happen. until then new things are happening all the time. information makes us able to make them happen they are local things. no one will be able to see the world die, to get back to the world's death. therefore in this world of new things happening there are stages which are very tiny but important to all of us. in these stages entropy doesn't increase & information & organization are being built up. the devil however is not anti-organization, nor is the sunset. viruses also persist, multiply & organize. "I pay them extra & make them do what I want." human beings are small pieces of decreasing entropy in their various spaces. their minds are full of ideas. a dog could be god. or part of an epic.

(p. 5)

Mayer presents here a panoramic vision of the interconnectedness of being, conceiving, in Bergson's terms, of "succession without distinction ... a mutual penetration, an interconnexion and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole,"⁹ so that "human beings are small pieces of decreasing entropy in their various spaces." In this connected world, which she has already established to be the text, "new things are happening all the time," and continue to do so throughout. Even in this brief passage certain sentences do not fit in any obvious sense into the logic of the narrative. Why, for instance, does this incongruous bit of speech enter in: "I pay them extra & make them do what I want." Who is speaking here and does the phrase have any political relation to what came before? Is Mayer merely exercising her poetic prerogative to be dialogic? And is there anything "mere" about this faculty, which permits the widening of the boundaries of self? Because Mayer is *part* of the writing, not *apart* from it, editing after the fact of writing is not an option for this text; she has given over that objectivity, in this case, to Anne Waldman, and, in a certain sense, to us. In this work she edits as she goes, and, as her mind changes, the form of the work changes; our minds, following, change too. The book is thus a kind of travel journal, metaphoricized there in her friend Grace who

has been to Paris, Maine, St. Croix, Calif., St. Thomas
Washington, N.M., London, Arizona, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wyoming,
Donegal, Carcassonne, Dublin ...
(p. 15)

The virtue of travel might be that as we remove ourselves from our too-familiar environments, we expand the limits of our subjectivities. Quite as a traditional novelist would, Mayer expands her subjectivity to the point where she can include such miscellaneous other voices as "I pay them extra & make them do what I want."

The following passage gives an example of such a maneuver, also providing us with glimpses of the political climate in which *Moving* was conceived:

"See them cats, they were the first cats in Cambodia."
"You must have wiretapped my dreams man."
"We gotta get our exercise"
"Really did a job on them. Blew them both away"
"Ohio, Vietnam, Cambodia"
"Better to kill than be killed"
(p. 6)

Soldier's voices, overheard perhaps on radio or television, penetrate Mayer and become part of her text, where "anything that moves" becomes fit material for art. We are party to this transmission into Mayer as she in turn transmits to us. The radio / television metaphor is particularly apt. From the original Orpheus to Milton's "Heav'nly Muse" to Cocteau's Orphée, who received his poems directly from the radio in the car belonging to the Queen of Death, the poet has been conceptualized as an instrument sensitive to external vibration. This concept would seem to negate the possibility of individual will. Mayer raises this very question:

All movement is a transmitter.
All movement is old. "Don't bother with moving it."
A reflection of a receiver seems to remain the same.
A moving picture of dots is all movement.
Does a transmitter have an idea?
(p. 11)

She doesn't try to close the question but continues to explore it as she writes, even changing philosophies as she moves, denying essence and then positing it and then questioning if the proposition is true:

... nothing
existed, not even a stick to support the vision: something in the waves
remains the same, outside the movement.
Is that true? What is a ring? & then the man

who has the narratives the man removed the sky. the man put up the sky because he was it.

(p. 11)

Mayer's will is very much a presence in the text; she's quite like the man who has the narratives who can manipulate the world because he is it. She questions the thing that "remains the same, outside the movement," and it is death, that "one big temperature equilibrium in which nothing new will ever really happen." But Mayer proves that "until then new things are happening all the time"; her presence, both receptive and controlling, makes them happen. Her artistic will does round off the work with a final coda:

man has been living on the earth for about half a million years with a head hair face forehead bumps arches temples eyes cheekbone cheek nose furrows grooves mouth dimples chin jaw ear neck throat hollows ...

(p. 31)

Although this excerpt barely serves to show it, Mayer's tendency to include is in full force here; she wants to get the whole world in. She takes us from evolution (our creation) to anatomy (our composition) to places (our situation) to activities (our movement). Then she brings us back to the beginning of the text, repeating it in a different form, ending with the gentle imperative to "share this."



Showing consciousness of its moment in history and supporting the intention of the text, the cover of *Moving* deserves a special note. It is an enlarged photograph of a film still showing, among other forms, the author's face. It very deliberately includes, at the top of the frame, the words "Kodak Gray Scale," and its corresponding image. The word "EKTACHROME" runs vertically up one side of the frame and down the other. Below is the title *Moving*, in large crude letters. At the center is a sideways image of Bernadette Mayer's face, pale and oval against a black background, as if it were peering out of the

window of a train. This image characterizes her as the intense and vulnerable spectre who haunts the book and makes things happen in it.

The text is fronted by a rough, skilled but childlike ink drawing by the author's sister of a giraffe and an exotic bird. Although not directly related to the text, it does serve to give a sense of the jungle-like lushness the pages offer, and to reaffirm the childlike attitude Mayer sometimes adopts, in order perhaps to perceive the world outside of the logico-rational parameters of "adult" discourse. The text is followed by another drawing by Rosemary Mayer in a similar style of an American Indian sitting in his landscape. He looks directly and serenely at the observer. I'd read his presence as an extension of Mayer's desire for an interconnected world like the one that Native American culture (albeit idealized) attests to. The simple naturalism of both drawings balances the modernity of the cover image (for this is the New York School's "lyrical modernity"), which acknowledges the text's situation in the world after the camera.

1 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (Macmillan, NY), p. 100.

2 William Carlos Williams, "The Work of Gertrude Stein," in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen (Grove Press, NY, 1973), p. 134.

3 Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1985), p. 184.

4 Stein, *LIA*, p. 165.

5 Stein, *LIA*, p. 165.

6 Bernadette Mayer, *Moving* (Angel Hair Press, NY, 1971), p.1.

7 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadology*, trans. Dr. Geo. R. Montgomery (The Open Court Publishing Co., La Salle, IL, 1957), p. 252.

8 Henri Bergson, *Selections* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York), p. 9.

9 Bergson, *TFW*, p. 100.

Nada Gordon

Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

Memory

I did once consider publishing an edition of *Memory* with all the photos (over 1200 of them) but that is a funny story. A man from Praeger came by my house and said he would publish it (Praeger would) if only I would make love to him. I knew him from the art world a bit and he was quite attractive too, an Italian boy in a black leather jacket, etc. I told him I would love to make love to him but only if he wouldnt publish my book, and then I'm afraid I asked him to leave, so then *Memory* with all the photographs never did get published. I tell you this story because it's on my mind because recently a similar thing happened and not only to me but also to a friend of mine and we often think that in poetry there is not that much at stake, I mean it's not Hollywood, but apparently these things do take place and it makes me very angry at men because to my knowledge women dont do this sort of thing, but that of course is a whole other thesis.

-- Letter received from Bernadette Mayer, October 12, 1986

Although humans are begining to learn about artificial memory, we still do not know precisely how our own memories function, where they reside, or what to make of them. Unlike artificial memory, human memory is laced with and distorted by desire and fear. The data we call back are never pure. To stimulate our memories we track our sense-impressions, whether olfactory, gustatory, tactile, aural, or visual. Freud says that memory is primarily auditory, and therefore linguistic:

Thinking in pictures is ... only a very incomplete way of becoming conscious. ... Word-presentations ... are residues of memories; they were at one time perceptions, and like all mnemonic residues they can become conscious again. ... Verbal residues are derived primarily from auditory perceptions. ... In essence a word is after all the mnemonic residue of a word that has been heard.¹

Our knowledge of each word might then be colored by the primal physical sensations we experienced as we acquired it; when we call up words to use, we might be calling them out of our memories sticky with subjective mnemonic residue, or, as Freud suggests, as mnemonic residue itself. Language is never truly objective, but always tainted by individual experience. This is the dimension in which language, by definition public, is private.

In *Memory*, Mayer presents words with the mnemonic residue intact. Reading *Memory*, we too endow the words with our own mnemonic residue, so the work becomes doubly, radically subjective. The memory it represents is not artificial or even historical (as in memoirs) but artistic. According to Gerard Genette, artistic memory, like that of Mayer or Proust, uses "the present object ... [as] merely a pretext, an occasion: it vanishes as soon as it has fulfilled its mnemonic function."² The photograph or the petite madeleine, caught up in the active distortion of imagination and reflection, submit to "an overloading in which the [object] becomes bogged down, engulfed, and finally disappears."³ What Proust really gave us was a picture of his mnemonic distortion, not a reproduction of past events. His artistic impulse, however, is to represent exactly:

The fine things we shall write if we have talent enough are within us, dimly, like the remembrance of a tune which charms us though we cannot recall its outline, nor even sketch its metrical form, say if there are pauses in it, or runs of rapid notes. Those who are haunted by this confused remembrance of truths they have never known are the men who are gifted; but if they never go beyond saying that they can hear a ravishing tune, they convey nothing to others, they are without talent. Talent is like a kind of memory, which in the end enables them to call back this confused music, to hear it distinctly, to write it down, to reproduce it, to sing it.⁴

But Vinteuil's little sonata would probably not have been so interesting reproduced exactly. It is the subjective veil with which Proust drapes the musical phrase that makes for the art of his novel. The talent Proust describes (with which Mayer is singularly blessed) is really a talent for tracking the sense impressions and the associative language that lead to the remembered object, which in itself is unimportant, merely a pastry or a stone or a photograph.

Like Proust's great work, *Memory* is the record of an attempt to make a tangible object of the past. Like Proust's novel, *Memory* distorts rather than represents. Both books are unwieldy, difficult, but impressive in their magnitude. *Memory* comes, of course, from a much different cultural, historical, personal, and sexual perspective than *A La Recherche de Temps Perdu*. This is evident in the form of the writing. Where in Proust the sentences, masquerading as fiction, wind about in elaborate dependent clauses, drenched with rhetoric, the movement of *Memory* is the forward rush of "truth," sometimes ignoring punctuation and decorum. Mayer provides us with a description of her compositional technique in her later work, *Studying Hunger*:

MEMORY was 1200 color snapshots, 3 x 5, processed by Kodak plus 7 hours of taped narration. I had shot one roll of 35-mm color film every day for the month of July, 1971. The pictures were mounted side-by-side in row after row along a long wall, each line to be read from left to right, 36 feet by 4 feet. All the images made each day were included, in sequence, along with a 31-part tape, which took the pictures as points of focus, one by one & as taking-off points for digression, filling in the spaces between. MEMORY was described by A.D. Coleman as an "enormous accumulation of data." I had described it as an "emotional science project." I was right.⁵

The difference between Coleman's and Mayer's descriptions would be that an artificial memory could in fact accumulate data, whereas a human memory, "tainted" with subjectivity, changes the data with its special focus. Mayer is observing not the past in itself but the way her emotions create the past in the present.

Instead of using, as Proust does, pastries and sonatas "as points of focus, one-by-one & as taking-off points for digression," Bernadette Mayer uses photographs. Photography, like film, and tape recordings, is a medium for artificial memory, and is therefore pure memory -- at least insofar as it is the record of light rays objects actually reflected.

Photographs give not merely a sketch or image of the object but an exact trace, subject only to the distortion of light and human manipulation, of its physical existence. Roland Barthes says in *Camera Lucida* that

The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence -- as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence. ... Here is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries: no one in the world can undeceive me.⁶

Mayer's project is an exaggerated but internalized realism. Her source is this unrefutable truth to which the photographs attest -- yet she reshapes this fixed truth with the fluidity of memory (never unmixed with imagination), thus putting those fixed "proofs" back into living duration from whence they came.

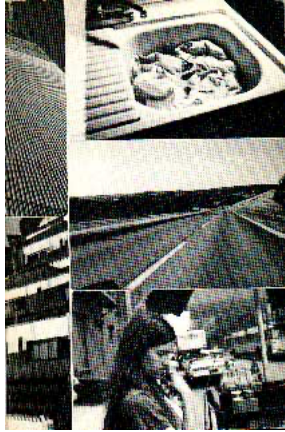
Memory tries to include everything, and tries to "invent a whole new language" in which to do so. The book's opening passage:

July 1

& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a
whole new language is a temptation. Men on the
wall in postured please take your foot by your hand
& think that this is pictures, picture book &
letters to everyone dash you tell what the story is
once once when they were nearly ready thursday july
first was a thursday; back windows across street
I'm in sun out image & so on riverdale, did you
know that, concentrated dash was all there was mind
nothing sink ... with my white pants in it.

(p. 1)

With the ampersand, Mayer begins the book in medias res -- a trick she perhaps learned from Baudelaire, who also opens a poem with "and." Such a technique acknowledges the fluidity of life and resists the fixity of writing. She begins with the object: the white sink once removed as the photograph of the white sink (reproduced on *Memory's* cover), and looks from there for her method: "a whole new language is a temptation." The "men on the wall in postures," while literally subjects of some of the photographs, might also be read as the posing objective critics of the work whom she asks to be awkward ("please take your foot by your hand"). She situates the story in a specific time and place and indicates her particular parallax, coming back to the pictured object, the point of departure, the white sink -- which could be analogized with the receptive mind ("was all there was mind nothing sink") holding the object ("my white pants").



As in *Moving*, Mayer here moves in and out of her subjectivity, focusing first on the object, then on her reactions to it and then on the object again. David Rubinfine (Mayer's psychoanalyst) notes in the brief introduction to *Memory* that Mayer

... has found the means to recreate archaic modes of representation of inner and outer sensory data. ... Her "memory" is regulated by a constantly changing organization of consciousness, shifting from perceived external reality to internal images and from present to past as present. ... differentiation between internal and external perception ... is not fixed and rigid, but fluid and dynamic.

Such fluidity is evidence of Mayer's capacity to perceive a connected world: the world outside, which forms us, and the world inside that informs the world outside.

Reading *Memory*, one duplicates Mayer's compositional method, moving from the materiality of the text to one's own reflections. The book is at once too dense -- with the words' material presence -- and too full of holes (in terms of linear logic) to read too strictly, as I tried to, thinking to arm myself with its entirety. Yet although I read through it spatially, from cover to cover, I could not fully read it (or any book) entirely vertically, for all its resonances (for then I would have been reading myself). *Memory* might serve as a model for the artifice of nature. Its language mimics the fluid chatter of consciousness as exactly as writing, trapped though it be in space,

can. By force of sheer deluge, Mayer's internal rhythms become the reader's; the "intersubjective bridge" starts not to seem like an abstraction. Mayer brings up this issue of "mind transference" in the coda to *Memory*, which eventually became a part of her next work *Studying Hunger*:

That's dreaming & baby what you want baby I got it & all they are doing is wanting, seek out your own hand writing hand writing of another one & pieced like eyes they look together at the dream & who am I speaking of & who am I talking to, I am talking with you I am violating you & my length like the length of this table's body violates your separate right, stirring up dust, if any. Your own space & plenty of motion. Now why should you bother to be me in this way as a mix which is final insult as ax on the head of the murderer & this is a public act ...

(p. 195)

And why should we "bother to be" her "in this way" for 195 dense pages? Because *Memory* aims to act as a "mix" between perceiver and creator, who both aim to lose their separateness to the extent that they can in art. This bit from *Memory* graphically -- linguistically -- illustrates such a process:

bme bme bme bme bme bme bme bme bme bme bme be me
be me be me be me be me be me be me
bemebemebemebemebe me bemebemenbeme
rememrememrememrememrememrememrememrememrememremem-
embermember bemberberrememberberbembe ...

(p. 77)

Such submersion in the book is facilitated by its style, which (to employ the most accepted literary example) may call to mind Molly Bloom's monologue, except that it is not fiction, it is written by a woman, and it continues for 195 pages. In *Memory*, Mayer forges the style of the natural.

Charles Bernstein, in an article called "Stray Straws and Straw Men" posits two sorts of poetry -- one "a poetry of visible borders ... an artifice ... manufactured, mechanized & formulaic at some points: willful.' He counterposes another sort -- "poetry primarily of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily" -- and challenges its assumptions:

I would point to Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* as a work that seems rooted in some of these ("natural") assumptions, as well as to much of Kerouac. In a different way ... Frank O'Hara's poetry is relevant. The achievement of these three poets has much to do with how they have fronted these assumptions. ... There is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is intended, chosen. ... Modes cannot be escaped, but they can be taken for granted. ... Work like Silliman's [a poetry of "visible borders"] explicitly acknowledges these conditions of poetry, language, by explicitly intending vocabulary,

syntax, shape, etc. ... The allure of the spontaneous & personal is cut here by the fact of wordness: reproducing not so much the look of the natural as the conditions of nature -- autonomy, self-sufficiency. In this light, a work like Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* can be seen to be significant not on account of its journal-like look alone but also on account of its completely intended, complex, artifactual style. Heavy, dense, embedded. ... Energy & emotion, spontaneity, vocabulary, shape -- all are elements of that building. It is natural that there are modes but there is no natural mode.⁷

Bernstein here insists on the primacy of the will in the art process. That Mayer is not simply a passive recording instrument (a human camera) is evident in the "fact of wordness" of *Memory* and in the way Mayer manipulates that fact. *Memory* is not all pure speech, "flowing freely," as this passage should illustrate:

\$13,000 in a joint account with D, eat creamed corn mixed with potatoes tomatoes great bread wine coffee summer meal summer spring & so on ed sank the eight ball yerba santa tea & janis joplin yoga & the rubber man at the circus / cut my cut: I fooled the ape virgin foraging got a grape from his purple groin I gave him pale apples his uvula ingraining with my leer's earful: lion pears gore the reigning angels to avenge the pope who has pale nirvana in his green vagina, meanwhile the papal prig is ripe feverish & angular, my lover veered to a prig like purrs from a nigger his legs liver & unpurged loins ravaged to a flowery orange by the profane green plunger, rape purple, the sexual etiology of the child: she wants heroin. The I character is usually the she.

(p. 89)

Bizarre content aside, the sound values here are clearly willfully artificed. So is the abrupt transition (marked by "cut my cut") from the daily details of money and food into the circus-world of poetic language (that which calls attention to its own materiality -- its "fact of wordness"), generously imbued with sex, violence, and imagination. Still, the form of this writing looks more like the jabber of a living female brain than any writing I have ever seen, and this is Mayer's special accomplishment.

Like a brain, *Memory* is overwhelmingly inclusive. This *Memory* is more like a net than a sieve. Occasionally in the text Mayer creates a wave of language that existentially questions the project itself.

a man with no morals, he took it off & I don't have to go on with this, what would you do? create laws? discuss the purpose of them? disorder the order that has already been established? order the increased volume of experience? or reject it altogether leaving nothing to be ordered & everything lax in a mess in chaos in a muddle out of place cluttered in a maze in a wilderness in a jungle in tangled skeins & loose fixes, a heroin addict wouldn't do it I must have no respect for nothingness to photograph these scenes

(p. 57)

Indeed, her impulse seems to be to fill space with matter almost impenetrably dense, to replace the tangled skeins of the world with the fixed (if equally complex) patterns of the book. In this (if not in morbidity) she resembles Beckett, and takes to heart his declaration, "I can't go on I'll go on." Her motivation for doing so is the border she has created -- the temporal space of a month. She is also motivated by a fascination with her materials -- language and photography; the text is less a narration of the month's events than a discourse upon these materials.

Her method, too, drives the work onwards. *Memory*, like Blanchot's definition of art, begins with the gaze. Mayer is concerned with the mechanisms of perception -- and particularly visual perception. She devotes an entire page to the description of an experiment that lays bare the device of seeing. And throughout, like Proust, Mayer is fascinated with reflection (the means by which the object can be seen and photographed) and superimposition (double exposure -- the mind laid over the world). Given the intention of both Mayer's and Proust's projects, one might muse here on the relation between "memory" and "reflection." They are in fact near-synonyms. In the dictionary definitions of these words, "re" is the most commonly occurring prefix. A more accurate description of the mechanism of these two books might, however, be "refraction," for they are not mirrors held up to nature, but human beings held up to nature, deflecting it, reshaped by human contact, via language. The voice of the willful artificer resounds in this passage from *Memory* in which Mayer, performing actions and viewing the effects of those actions, exploits the potent prefix "re":

as I might be able to recreate later from this & in my mind I would re-argue reascend
reassemble & there was a reassembly & I would reassert & there was a reassertion & I
would reassess reassign reassimilate & there was a reassimilation & I would reassume
and there was a reassumption & I would reattach and there was a reattachment & I
would reattack reattempt reawaken rebind rebloom & I would reblossom reboil rebuild
& something was rebuilt & I would rebury

(p. 68)

Memory (both the book and the faculty) might be conceptualized as a huge factory whose function is to help the self survive in and negotiate the world. It is the process by which the data that the mind receives is ordered and called back for future use; without it there can be no learning. This book is the record of Mayer's attempt to come to grips with externality, with "the enormous accumulation of data" every human being, and probably every animal, accrues each day. At the end of her month-long process, and at the end of the text that forms *Memory*, Mayer's external focus begins to force itself inward. She titles the coda to this book "Dreaming":

Cause memory & the process of remembering of seeing what's in sight, what's data,
what comes in for a while for a month & a month's a good time for an experiment
memory stifles dream it shuts dream up. What's in sight, it was there, it's over, dream
makes memory present, hidden memory the secret dream, it's not allowed, forbidden,

don't come out the door, there's an assassin at it or a lion, wild Indian, a boar, a little bear upside down in the dream, so, memory creates an explosion of dream in August & I no longer rest anymore I don't resist anymore
(p. 189)

Approaching the end of *Memory* must have been like approaching the edge of a flat world, for "fear had already started as a finish to memory & memory as an opening onto a finish for fear." [p. 189] *Studying Hunger*, Mayer's next work, becomes an exploration of fear itself.

1 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans., Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey (Norton, 1962), pp. 10-11.

2 Gerard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Columbia, NY, 1982), p. 209.

3 Genette, p. 215.

4 Marcel Proust, *On Art and Literature: 1896-1919*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (Carroll and Graf Publishers, NY, 1954), p. 276.

5 Bernadette Mayer, *Studying Hunger* (Adventures in Poetry / Big Sky, 1975).

6 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, NY, 1981), p.115.

7 Charles Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 39.

Nada Gordon

Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

Studying Hunger

I think of someone who said that's a pretty cheerful view of things, meaning MEMORY, & meant you don't show the bad side the side the side to the side I guess he meant

-- *Studying Hunger*, p. 46

And to those who accept a rose from me I add this: I am sorry to cover my feelings with images of fear, but please believe me there are things you cannot write.

-- *Studying Hunger*, p. 11

I guess we have to talk about desire here as mainly transformational. Who was it talked about "the lineaments of gratified desire"? [Blake] Ornamental phrase. And "lineaments" doesn't sound at all surprising as those residues often are. When you say you'd want to write the truth of pregnancy I'm already itching to see what that desire would lead you to say. In *Studying Hunger* you kept putting it a way that's always stuck with me: "Can I say that?" Those four words perfectly hit at the whole problem of the range of truth in language.

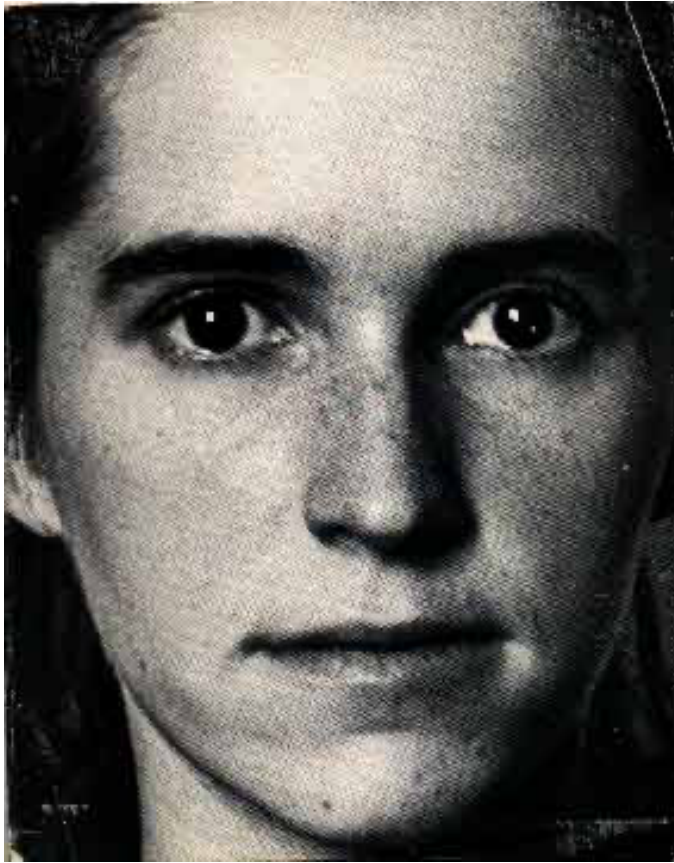
-- Clark Coolidge, Letter to Bernadette Mayer, January 21, 1980, UCSD Collection

Listen: the world becomes progressively less edible.

-- *Studying Hunger*, p. 46

Thoughts I had while typesetting STUDYING HUNGER: eat god's food raw.

-- Barrett Watten, Letter to Bernadette Mayer, no date, UCSD Collection



Fear is the fuel that drives *Studying Hunger*, Mayer's next major work after *Memory*. Excerpted from a 365-page journal of her psychoanalysis, *Studying Hunger* is Mayer's reaction to the forced externalization of *Memory*. *Studying Hunger* is instead a forced internalization, springing not from the materiality of photographs but from the vicissitudes of mood. As with *Moving* and *Memory*, the book's cover is a photograph portrait of the artist, but each differs from the other in the same way the texts do. The cover of *Moving* shows Mayer's face in the middle of a medium (a still shot from a film). The cover of *Memory* shows Mayer in the midst of her external circumstances -- her friends, her white pants, her city. But the cover of *Studying Hunger* is simply a photo of Mayer's face blown up larger than life. Her wide-open, glinting black eyes stare directly at the camera / observer. Their expression is one of simultaneous power and terror -- the eyes of a criminal. I have seen several people turn this book over on its "face" for fear of its gaze. It is a forced stare, vulnerable, passionate, and relentless, drugged and drugging -- Orpheus looking at Eurydice, Lot looking at his wife, Medusa looking at her victim.

The writing is commensurate with the image that envelops it. Opening this book, we are invited to step into the caverns of Mayer's brain, but onto a different path than that

which carried the "mind traffic" of *Moving* or led to the intricate materiality of *Memory*. For *Studying Hunger* is psychoanalysis. One entry begins:

FREUD, FREUND, FRIEND, FREEZING, FJORD, FEUD, FEND for yourself.
(p. 51)

This is classic associative method. The book might well be "a musical of Lacan's text, a muscle of Lacan's text." [p. 54] In one passage she directly addresses Lacan:

Dear Dr. Lacan, the penultimate distance between myself and you (if you were sitting on the peacock (that is, where it is presently placed in the room), & I myself were all-in-one like a cat half-dozing on the absent you (I mean rug) (sic)
(p. 54)

Our position in relation to this text can be analyst (we are, in this passage, Lacan, because in "the confusion of possible yous" -- the central confusion of the book -- "one thing replaces another") or co-patient, when we identify with Mayer's struggle. These relations are always in question, for Mayer's quest is to "find a solution to the YOU problem." As a student of Lacan, Mayer looks for the solution to the YOU problem in the interstices of her consciousness (her writing); she builds gaps into her writing, hoping to find in them a new communicative method outside of logical language. Her method is anything but subtle, designed to force her consciousness into the reader / other, of whom she is very much aware:

Magic words were a lead-in to the solution of the YOU problem. But the YOU problem & the problem of states of consciousness could never be solved until I had forgotten all about them. These problems began to solve themselves when I became interested only in the transitions between thought. By transitions I mean communicating lapses. Maybe, if you made the work all transitions you could get the mind to shift natively on call. & whose mind. Transitions like the covers that are the lids of your eyes, & sometimes, they come in layers & the lid looks like three, like you fucked three times, got rid of your cold & got tired, you didn't know where you were, you lost states of consciousness for a while & this happened to me because I couldn't do what I thought was really writing & if I could read all of this to you you might have the feeling that I have been shrieking at you for hours & you would finally get a real translation of thought.
(p. 27)

"The YOU problem" was, as I noted, already a concern at the end of *Memory*. The coda to *Memory* appears in the text of *Studying Hunger* as well; as Mayer says in *Studying Hunger*, "My own work was never finished & it was always leading back to itself & to older work. Not a system of feedback but a system of feeding." (p. 21) Mayer thus redefines the word "book" -- not as a closed and inviolable object but rather a record of duration, a moment whose properties can bleed into or become parts of other moments.

How the project of *Memory* generated the project of *Studying Hunger* Mayer outlines at the outset of the latter text:

Anyway

When I began to attempt the month-long experiment with states of consciousness, I wrote down a list of intentions. It went like this: First to record special states of consciousness. Special: change, sudden change, high, low, food, levels of attention
And, how intentions change
And, to do this as an emotional science, as though:

I have taken a month-drug, I work as observer of self in process

And, to do the opposite of "accumulate data," oppose MEMORIES, DIARIES, find structures

And, a language should be used that stays on the observation / notes / leaps side of language border which seems to separate, just barely, observation and analysis. But if the language must resort to analysis to "keep going," then let it be closer to that than to "accumulate data." *Keep going* is a pose; *accumulate data* is a pose.

Also, to use this to find a structure for *Memory* and you, you will find out what memory is, you already know what moving is

And, to do this without remembering

(p. 7)

Mayer encountered a problem at the first stage of her experiment: she could not write pure observation, language stripped of its mnemonic residue, its resonance. As a result of this struggle, a certain apprehension appears in the writing:

Those were the intentions I wrote down, April first. Also, these questions: What's the danger? What states of consciousness & patterns of them are new to language? What's the relation of things that stand out, things that seem interesting. ... what's the relation of this type of even to the rest & how to develop moments as, "standing out" like language does, like language ideas do. "Some old people try to live on one can of soup a day."

(p. 7)

The "danger" was that her medium disallows pure description by insisting on its own material presence. Her apprehension became a stopgap:

On April second, the first thing I wrote was "You wait." The experiment went badly, real bad. I added to my intentions, this one: to be an enchantress, or, to seduce by design. I thought about sentences that stuck in your mind, like, "How long have you been head of this business?" and "You planned the disappearance of my desire."

(p. 7)

This new intention differs significantly from the others. With it she takes into consideration the reader / other, whereas the other intentions are purely descriptive. She also introduces her artistic will into the language; she struggles with the demand that it be merely an instrument:

I was waging a constant battle against traditional language. ... As I got further into this, language seemed to be demanding its form: lying in bed, head down, muscles arched, colors plotted the outline-sound of a language, an unmarked language, not controlling it. Forget any substance of meaning, forget substantives & their color & get it gradually paler, seeing sound vibrations in sleep-closed eyes.

(p. 8)

Although she gave up the project for two months, the fact that she'd begun to allow the language to demand its form opened the floodgates of her associative inner language, already opened up a crack in her reaction to *Memory*:

Gave up the project. ... But I was bound to start again. You see, the whole thing had already had a beginning with a project called *Memory* which turned into a show which turned into a dream or returned to a dream that enabled me to walk. Before this I couldn't walk, I had street fantasies like any normal prostitute.

(p. 9)

Having announced her intention to seduce, and by including declarations like this, Mayer spotlights what is present in her other works but not particularly emphasized: a bold female sexuality ("Goddammit my cunt smells so good in this strange city" [p. 52]), simultaneously a need and a power (her expression on the cover emits both terror and control.) This "sensual power, greatest evil, without design, her rule, the impossible," infuses the language of this book, "& pose[s] the finite as a trick." The passage (in both a literal and literary sense) that first admits this power starts to weave the maddening spell of *Studying Hunger*:

You sleep Marie: save them for me, certain moments, I'm resting, I'm restoring, I'm gathering, I'm hunting, I'm starving, I'm you, you say: go on being, peering owl on top of fortress, sounding out, training sound to meet my ear, drive & mark time, I'm a history, her coil, mark time, suffer a moment to let me be like her a history, object, she was determined, defies all laws & rules, is the language I bought from passers-by, sea crate full of junk & language twisting & twisting coil of all morning. ...

That's what started me off again & that's what opened the question of who is the you.
You private person.
(p. 9)

Mayer describes the language of *Studying Hunger* as "a buzz, a confluence of noise all around, all correcting & weaving"; it is a sexual, generative, beckoning, devouring, language, as she says, "weaving to call my name, Bernadette." (p. 9) She early makes the equation between sex and food: "sex is still food" (p. 21). Food and sex metaphors mix:

And even before that, there were so many pastries & cakes, I was rolling around in them, demanding things, special ones, strawberry cupcakes, my favorite, I was lying in them at the bakery, forging desires I didn't even have for the sheer joy of demanding, of making demands all night, baking all night, all for me, to lie in, to destroy the half I couldn't eat
(p. 23)

Here she lets her desire for food run to such excess that it becomes sexual, then violent. The complex of food, sex, and violence, all under the umbrella of desire, that *Studying Hunger* is composed of works on several levels at once. The hunger she is studying is not just the stomach's and the groin's but also the mind's. Coming out of *Memory*, this book is an investigation into *Memory*, and sometimes even takes on the mannerisms of a detective novel. Like the detective novel, it is analytical ("an emotional science ... an observer of self in process"). Like the detective novel, it has a crime at its center, a crime that is related to the complex of food / sex / violence, and even religion: cannibalism. The book, as I've said, seeks to find a solution to "the YOU problem"; it seeks to find a true mix of subject and object, and makes itself the record of frustration at not being able to really mix:

a more intrepid talker than myself would have shouted her ideas across the gulf by now but for me there must first be a close & unembarrassed contiguity with my companion or I cannot say one real word.
(p. 57)

Mayer's Catholic upbringing must have highlighted for her the fact that the closest and most unembarrassed contiguity is not sex, but eating. Hence the melodramatic climax to the book, in which she actually eats the other: "I bring some of the flesh with me to survive on, exclusively, until I am arrested." (p. 71)

As in all of her writings, Mayer addresses the question of the relationships of writing to life: "Poetry's where you all find something, maybe I could find something to eat there, something anyone at all." (p. 53) Poetry is the realm of disparate personal meanings, where anyone who has the language can "find something to eat" that hopefully is an aid to survival. Mayer transforms her earlier equation to sex=food=poetry. Around each of

these, patterns of guilt form: "And I know why I keep trying to crack the code. Poetry is unethical. You shouldn't do it, it's bad, it's filth, it screws you around ..." (p. 21) her social guilt (sounding almost sexual -- substitute "masturbation" for "poetry") surfaces here with her concern that poetry is unethical. Although she is a bourgeois white American, she "want[s] to steal and be a revolutionary ... to alter the environment." (p. 57) Speaking for poets, she says "we are not in power / we just try to change the fucking language." She is aware that she is supported by the same system that murders revolutionaries: "I depend on the U.S. Government that murders Allende, It's [sic] council on the arts supports me." (p. 57) She frankly allows this disturbing detail into the body of the text, attacking the rarefied notion of pure poetry: "no I don't even like good writing, it's pure poetry, it's pure crap" (p. 57). She operates politically within her chosen sphere.

She very purposefully situates herself as a small press writer, actually handling the books she writes and distributes, as very few modern writers, alienated from the products of their labor, get a chance to. She creates a delicate, Williams-like poem out of this gesture:

I cut my thumb
making inside covers
for memory & the
jokes of it cease
to be small
(p. 31)

Such intimacy, whose results are sometimes dangerous, is the quest of the entire book; the tension of that desire and the inadequacy of language to provide an exact "translation of thought" generate its hermetic, resonant mass. Yet the force of that desire pervades the book and the reader can't help but respond; to the extent that language can facilitate intimacy, this text is "touching":

Read the dictionary all you want, you will never
find out what touch means, except that it's a light

blow and, to put the
hand, finger, or other part of the body on, so as
to feel: "we feel so close."
(p. 65)

Nada Gordon

Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

Memory

I did once consider publishing an edition of *Memory* with all the photos (over 1200 of them) but that is a funny story. A man from Praeger came by my house and said he would publish it (Praeger would) if only I would make love to him. I knew him from the art world a bit and he was quite attractive too, an Italian boy in a black leather jacket, etc. I told him I would love to make love to him but only if he wouldn't publish my book, and then I'm afraid I asked him to leave, so then *Memory* with all the photographs never did get published. I tell you this story because it's on my mind because recently a similar thing happened and not only to me but also to a friend of mine and we often think that in poetry there is not that much at stake, I mean it's not Hollywood, but apparently these things do take place and it makes me very angry at men because to my knowledge women don't do this sort of thing, but that of course is a whole other thesis.

-- Letter received from Bernadette Mayer, October 12, 1986

Although humans are beginning to learn about artificial memory, we still do not know precisely how our own memories function, where they reside, or what to make of them. Unlike artificial memory, human memory is laced with and distorted by desire and fear. The data we call back are never pure. To stimulate our memories we track our sense-impressions, whether olfactory, gustatory, tactile, aural, or visual. Freud says that memory is primarily auditory, and therefore linguistic:

Thinking in pictures is ... only a very incomplete way of becoming conscious. ... Word-presentations ... are residues of memories; they were at one time perceptions, and like all mnemonic residues they can become conscious again. ... Verbal residues are derived primarily from auditory perceptions. ... In essence a word is after all the mnemonic residue of a word that has been heard.¹

Our knowledge of each word might then be colored by the primal physical sensations we experienced as we acquired it; when we call up words to use, we might be calling them out of our memories sticky with subjective mnemonic residue, or, as Freud suggests, as mnemonic residue itself. Language is never truly objective, but always tainted by individual experience. This is the dimension in which language, by definition public, is private.

In *Memory*, Mayer presents words with the mnemonic residue intact. Reading *Memory*, we too endow the words with our own mnemonic residue, so the work becomes doubly, radically subjective. The memory it represents is not artificial or even historical (as in memoirs) but artistic. According to Gerard Genette, artistic memory, like that of Mayer or Proust, uses "the present object ... [as] merely a pretext, an occasion: it vanishes as soon as it has fulfilled its mnemonic function."² The photograph or the petite madeleine, caught up in the active distortion of imagination and reflection, submit to "an overloading in which the [object] becomes bogged down, engulfed, and finally

disappears."³ What Proust really gave us was a picture of his mnemonic distortion, not a reproduction of past events. His artistic impulse, however, is to represent exactly:

The fine things we shall write if we have talent enough are within us, dimly, like the remembrance of a tune which charms us though we cannot recall its outline, nor even sketch its metrical form, say if there are pauses in it, or runs of rapid notes. Those who are haunted by this confused remembrance of truths they have never known are the men who are gifted; but if they never go beyond saying that they can hear a ravishing tune, they convey nothing to others, they are without talent. Talent is like a kind of memory, which in the end enables them to call back this confused music, to hear it distinctly, to write it down, to reproduce it, to sing it.⁴

But Vinteuil's little sonata would probably not have been so interesting reproduced exactly. It is the subjective veil with which Proust drapes the musical phrase that makes for the art of his novel. The talent Proust describes (with which Mayer is singularly blessed) is really a talent for tracking the sense impressions and the associative language that lead to the remembered object, which in itself is unimportant, merely a pastry or a stone or a photograph.

Like Proust's great work, *Memory* is the record of an attempt to make a tangible object of the past. Like Proust's novel, *Memory* distorts rather than represents. Both books are unwieldy, difficult, but impressive in their magnitude. *Memory* comes, of course, from a much different cultural, historical, personal, and sexual perspective than *A La Recherche de Temps Perdu*. This is evident in the form of the writing. Where in Proust the sentences, masquerading as fiction, wind about in elaborate dependent clauses, drenched with rhetoric, the movement of *Memory* is the forward rush of "truth," sometimes ignoring punctuation and decorum. Mayer provides us with a description of her compositional technique in her later work, *Studying Hunger*:

MEMORY was 1200 color snapshots, 3 x 5, processed by Kodak plus 7 hours of taped narration. I had shot one roll of 35-mm color film every day for the month of July, 1971. The pictures were mounted side-by-side in row after row along a long wall, each line to be read from left to right, 36 feet by 4 feet. All the images made each day were included, in sequence, along with a 31-part tape, which took the pictures as points of focus, one by one & as taking-off points for digression, filling in the spaces between. MEMORY was described by A.D. Coleman as an "enormous accumulation of data." I had described it as an "emotional science project." I was right.⁵

The difference between Coleman's and Mayer's descriptions would be that an artificial memory could in fact accumulate data, whereas a human memory, "tainted" with subjectivity, changes the data with its special focus. Mayer is observing not the past in itself but the way her emotions create the past in the present.

Instead of using, as Proust does, pastries and sonatas "as points of focus, one-by-one & as taking-off points for digression," Bernadette Mayer uses photographs. Photography, like film, and tape recordings, is a medium for artificial memory, and is therefore pure memory -- at least insofar as it is the record of light rays objects actually reflected. Photographs give not merely a sketch or image of the object but an exact trace, subject only to the distortion of light and human manipulation, of its physical existence. Roland Barthes says in *Camera Lucida* that

The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence -- as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence. ... Here is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries: no one in the world can undecieve me.⁶

Mayer's project is an exaggerated but internalized realism. Her source is this unrefutable truth to which the photographs attest -- yet she reshapes this fixed truth with the fluidity of memory (never unmixed with imagination), thus putting those fixed "proofs" back into living duration from whence they came.

Memory tries to include everything, and tries to "invent a whole new language" in which to do so. The book's opening passage:

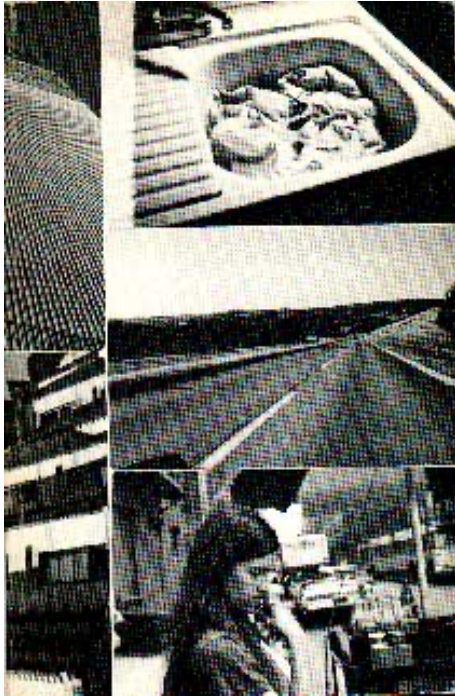
July 1

& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a
whole new language is a temptation. Men on the
wall in postured please take your foot by your hand
& think that this is pictures, picture book &
letters to everyone dash you tell what the story is
once once when they were nearly ready thursday july
first was a thursday; back windows across street
I'm in sun out image & so on riverdale, did you
know that, concentrated dash was all there was mind
nothing sink ... with my white pants in it.

(p. 1)

With the ampersand, Mayer begins the book in medias res -- a trick she perhaps learned from Baudelaire, who also opens a poem with "and." Such a technique acknowledges the fluidity of life and resists the fixity of writing. She begins with the object: the white sink once removed as the photograph of the white sink (reproduced on *Memory's* cover), and looks from there for her method: "a whole new language is a temptation." The "men on the wall in postures," while literally subjects of some of the photographs, might also be read as the posing objective critics of the work whom she asks to be awkward ("please take your foot by your hand"). She situates the story in a specific time and place and indicates her particular parallax, coming back to the pictured object, the

point of departure, the white sink -- which could be analogized with the receptive mind ("was all there was mind nothing sink") holding the object ("my white pants").



As in *Moving*, Mayer here moves in and out of her subjectivity, focusing first on the object, then on her reactions to it and then on the object again. David Rubinfine (Mayer's psychoanalyst) notes in the brief introduction to *Memory* that Mayer

... has found the means to recreate archaic modes of representation of inner and outer sensory data. ... Her "memory" is regulated by a constantly changing organization of consciousness, shifting from perceived external reality to internal images and from present to past as present. ... differentiation between internal and external perception ... is not fixed and rigid, but fluid and dynamic.

Such fluidity is evidence of Mayer's capacity to perceive a connected world: the world outside, which forms us, and the world inside that informs the world outside.

Reading *Memory*, one duplicates Mayer's compositional method, moving from the materiality of the text to one's own reflections. The book is at once too dense -- with the words' material presence -- and too full of holes (in terms of linear logic) to read too strictly, as I tried to, thinking to arm myself with its entirety. Yet although I read through it spatially, from cover to cover, I could not fully read it (or any book) entirely

vertically, for all its resonances (for then I would have been reading myself). *Memory* might serve as a model for the artifice of nature. Its language mimics the fluid chatter of consciousness as exactly as writing, trapped though it be in space, can. By force of sheer deluge, Mayer's internal rhythms become the reader's; the "intersubjective bridge" starts not to seem like an abstraction. Mayer brings up this issue of "mind transference" in the coda to *Memory*, which eventually became a part of her next work *Studying Hunger*:

That's dreaming & baby what you want baby I got it & all they are doing is wanting, seek out your own hand writing hand writing of another one & pieced like eyes they look together at the dream & who am I speaking of & who am I talking to, I am talking with you I am violating you & my length like the length of this table's body violates your separate right, stirring up dust, if any. Your own space & plenty of motion. Now why should you bother to be me in this way as a mix which is final insult as ax on the head of the murderer & this is a public act ...

(p. 195)

And why should we "bother to be" her "in this way" for 195 dense pages? Because *Memory* aims to act as a "mix" between perceiver and creator, who both aim to lose their separateness to the extent that they can in art. This bit from *Memory* graphically -- linguistically -- illustrates such a process:

bme bme bme bme bme bme bme bme bme bme be me
be me be me be me be me be me be me
bemebemebemebemebe me bemebemenbeme
rememrememrememrememrememrememrememrememrememmemm-
embermember bemberberrememberberbemembe ...

(p. 77)

Such submersion in the book is facilitated by its style, which (to employ the most accepted literary example) may call to mind Molly Bloom's monologue, except that it is not fiction, it is written by a woman, and it continues for 195 pages. In *Memory*, Mayer forges the style of the natural.

Charles Bernstein, in an article called "Stray Straws and Straw Men" posits two sorts of poetry -- one "a poetry of visible borders ... an artifice ... manufactured, mechanized & formulaic at some points: willful." He counterposes another sort -- "poetry primarily of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily" -- and challenges its assumptions:

I would point to Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* as a work that seems rooted in some of these ("natural") assumptions, as well as to much of Kerouac. In a different way ... Frank O'Hara's poetry is relevant. The achievement of these three poets has much to do with how they have fronted these assumptions. ... There is no natural look or sound to a

poem. Every element is intended, chosen. ... Modes cannot be escaped, but they can be taken for granted. ... Work like Silliman's [a poetry of "visible borders"] explicitly acknowledges these conditions of poetry, language, by explicitly intending vocabulary, syntax, shape, etc. ... The allure of the spontaneous & personal is cut here by the fact of wordness: reproducing not so much the look of the natural as the conditions of nature -- autonomy, self-sufficiency. In this light, a work like Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* can be seen to be significant not on account of its journal-like look alone but also on account of its completely intended, complex, artifactual style. Heavy, dense, embedded. ... Energy & emotion, spontaneity, vocabulary, shape -- all are elements of that building. It is natural that there are modes but there is no natural mode.⁷

Bernstein here insists on the primacy of the will in the art process. That Mayer is not simply a passive recording instrument (a human camera) is evident in the "fact of wordness" of *Memory* and in the way Mayer manipulates that fact. *Memory* is not all pure speech, "flowing freely," as this passage should illustrate:

\$13,000 in a joint account with D, eat creamed corn mixed with potatoes tomatoes great bread wine coffee summer meal summer spring & so on ed sank the eight ball yerba santa tea & janis joplin yoga & the rubber man at the circus / cut my cut: I fooled the ape virgin foraging got a grape from his purple groin I gave him pale apples his uvula ingraining with my leer's earful: lion pears gore the reigning angels to avenge the pope who has pale nirvana in his green vagina, meanwhile the papal prig is ripe feverish & angular, my lover veered to a prig like purrs from a nigger his legs liver & unpurged loins ravaged to a flowery orange by the profane green plunger, rape purple, the sexual etiology of the child: she wants heroin. The I character is usually the she.

(p. 89)

Bizarre content aside, the sound values here are clearly willfully artificed. So is the abrupt transition (marked by "cut my cut") from the daily details of money and food into the circus-world of poetic language (that which calls attention to its own materiality -- its "fact of wordness"), generously imbued with sex, violence, and imagination. Still, the form of this writing looks more like the jabber of a living female brain than any writing I have ever seen, and this is Mayer's special accomplishment.

Like a brain, *Memory* is overwhelmingly inclusive. This *Memory* is more like a net than a sieve. Occasionally in the text Mayer creates a wave of language that existentially questions the project itself.

a man with no morals, he took it off & I don't have to go on with this, what would you do? create laws? discuss the purpose of them? disorder the order that has already been established? order the increased volume of experience? or reject it altogether leaving nothing to be ordered & everything lax in a mess in chaos in a muddle out of place cluttered in a maze in a wilderness in a jungle in tangled skeins & loose fixes, a heroin

addict wouldn't do it I must have no respect for nothingness to photograph these scenes
(p. 57)

Indeed, her impulse seems to be to fill space with matter almost impenetrably dense, to replace the tangled skeins of the world with the fixed (if equally complex) patterns of the book. In this (if not in morbidity) she resembles Beckett, and takes to heart his declaration, "I can't go on I'll go on." Her motivation for doing so is the border she has created -- the temporal space of a month. She is also motivated by a fascination with her materials -- language and photography; the text is less a narration of the month's events than a discourse upon these materials.

Her method, too, drives the work onwards. *Memory*, like Blanchot's definition of art, begins with the gaze. Mayer is concerned with the mechanisms of perception -- and particularly visual perception. She devotes an entire page to the description of an experiment that lays bare the device of seeing. And throughout, like Proust, Mayer is fascinated with reflection (the means by which the object can be seen and photographed) and superimposition (double exposure -- the mind laid over the world). Given the intention of both Mayer's and Proust's projects, one might muse here on the relation between "memory" and "reflection." They are in fact near-synonyms. In the dictionary definitions of these words, "re" is the most commonly occurring prefix. A more accurate description of the mechanism of these two books might, however, be "refraction," for they are not mirrors held up to nature, but human beings held up to nature, deflecting it, reshaped by human contact, via language. The voice of the willful artificer resounds in this passage from *Memory* in which Mayer, performing actions and viewing the effects of those actions, exploits the potent prefix "re":

as I might be able to recreate later from this & in my mind I would re-argue reascend
reassemble & there was a reassembly & I would reassert & there was a reassertion & I
would reassess reassign reassimilate & there was a reassimilation & I would reassume
and there was a reassumption & I would reattach and there was a reattachment & I
would reattack reattempt reawaken rebind rebloom & I would reblossom reboil rebuild
& something was rebuilt & I would rebury
(p. 68)

Memory (both the book and the faculty) might be conceptualized as a huge factory whose function is to help the self survive in and negotiate the world. It is the process by which the data that the mind receives is ordered and called back for future use; without it there can be no learning. This book is the record of Mayer's attempt to come to grips with externality, with "the enormous accumulation of data" every human being, and probably every animal, accrues each day. At the end of her month-long process, and at the end of the text that forms *Memory*, Mayer's external focus begins to force itself inward. She titles the coda to this book "Dreaming":

Cause memory & the process of remembering of seeing what's in sight, what's data, what comes in for a while for a month & a month's a good time for an experiment memory stifles dream it shuts dream up. What's in sight, it was there, it's over, dream makes memory present, hidden memory the secret dream, it's not allowed, forbidden, don't come out the door, there's an assassin at it or a lion, wild Indian, a boar, a little bear upside down in the dream, so, memory creates an explosion of dream in August & I no longer rest anymore I don't resist anymore
(p. 189)

Approaching the end of *Memory* must have been like approaching the edge of a flat world, for "fear had already started as a finish to memory & memory as an opening onto a finish for fear." [p. 189] *Studying Hunger*, Mayer's next work, becomes an exploration of fear itself.

1 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans., Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey (Norton, 1962), pp. 10-11.

2 Gerard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Columbia, NY, 1982), p. 209.

3 Genette, p. 215.

4 Marcel Proust, *On Art and Literature: 1896-1919*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (Carroll and Graf Publishers, NY, 1954), p. 276.

5 Bernadette Mayer, *Studying Hunger* (Adventures in Poetry / Big Sky, 1975).

6 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, NY, 1981), p.115.

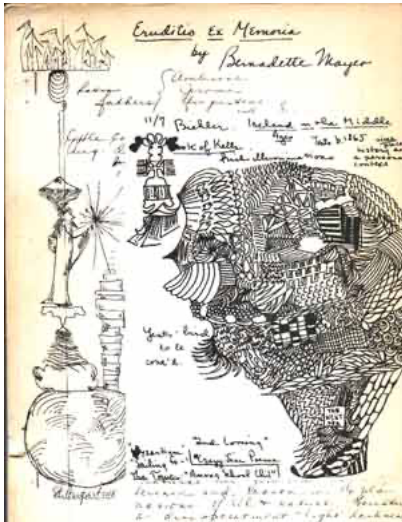
7 Charles Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 39.

Nada Gordon

Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

[This is the second half of *Form's Life*, a thesis written in 1986. The first half appears in [Readme 3](#).]

Eruditio Ex Memoria



Memory, history, personal history, autobiography, metaphysical autobiography, *Eruditio Ex Memoria* is all of these. Yet this book projects a memory not of the self, but of the self as defined by the knowledge which makes up the self, which perceives the world in which the self lives. And in this sense Bernadette Mayer's new work is a cosmology, an encyclopedia, an anatomy ... Unlike the picaresque — which is a satire of society, of its structures ... — the anatomy is a satire built up through a presentation of a vision "of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern." Northrop Frye continues (in *Anatomy of Criticism*) "The intellectual structure built up from the story makes for violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative, though the appearance of carelessness that results reflects only the carelessness of the reader of his tendency to judge by a novel-centered conception of fiction. The shortest form of the anatomy is the dialogue, but there is a strong tendency toward a display of erudition, of encyclopedic knowledge, of complications, catalogues and lists ..."

— Douglas Messerli, "Anatomy of Self," *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, #7, March 1979

In his review of *Eruditio Ex Memoria*, excerpts of which I've quoted as the epigraph to this chapter, Douglas Messerli defines very concisely the character of the book. He describes it as an objective documentation of the self: "the self defined by the knowledge which makes up the self." It succeeds in this project as *Studying Hunger* was unable to. The perspective of *Studying Hunger* was to look at the self from the inside out; *Eruditio Ex Memoria* is more epistemological, a deconstruction, followed by a reconstruction, of the building blocks of knowledge.

Mayer's compositional method for this book is to rescue the reams of documentation she acquired throughout her academic life, and to reformulate them as art. I have never

seen old school notes put to such fruitful use. Walter Benjamin said that "boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience"; in this case it hatches the egg of art. As a student, I many times wandered off the linear path of the professor's discourse and aestheticized my notes as I took them; Mayer creates an entire book from this technique. The result is a book of facts and reflections which, although they are multivalent, are more straightforward to read than any of her previous works. *Eruditio* is essentially a list, with no logically necessary order; Mayer published the book without pagination – like knowledge, it is contained in one "place," but it need not be retraced in a straight line. New combinations (and hence new insights) are always possible. *Eruditio* is a monadology of knowledge, whose units (epistemes, really) combine like those of the DNA spiral to make a life. The convergences that create dynamism in this text come from many different orders of things, and so sometimes sound fanciful, but never arbitrary. We do not merely witness the chance meeting of umbrellas and sewing machines on dingy operating tables. Mayer culls the book's substance from facts and ideas deliberately taught and learned, then altered by Mayer's art, will, and humour:

Hemispheres become loose in the country, there are new forms. Stanislavsky, etc. Add up a column of numbers, it comes to William Carlos Williams to me. What are the spiritual heights, she said. Just as Uncle Vanya looks like a dial, Paris comes and goes, prissy, lightfooted and beautiful-looking, but, by and large, the outside forces come to the surface. By the same token, we seem fully uneven, without the bones and stays. The homecoming: she opened and closed her conversation with adequacy. There's a picture of a woman dancing with a leaf for a hand, her head on a string, hanging forward. It's Madam Shaw. relevant is relevant, irrational knot, unsocial socialist, unpleasant and pleasant Madam Shaw. Oh Shaw, polygmammalian, the candidate, there's heart and a louse on the skunk.

Stanislavsky, Williams, Chekhov, and Shaw meet here in Mayer's mind, the "outside forces" (knowledge) having "come to the surface" (Mayer's attention). We are privy to the explosion of poetic language this encounter permits. Without the "bones and stays" of narrative logic, the text might "seem fully uneven," but in the form of a list, everything counts ("relevant is relevant") and the side of the brain that adds up numbers has to be willing to concede they come out "William Carlos Williams" to the other half. Like all of Mayer's works (because she places such an emphasis on intention), the book is profoundly self-aware; it is its own best critical authority. But it is deliberately not authoritarian; it refuses to close the vital questions of writing:

Literature is a way of behaving: you commit suicide (if you're a surrealist, who told me this). The tragic view of life has something to do with laughter and the phrase "wretched idiocies." The poet inspires events (Son of Sam). The little words are tenuously connected containers, little communicating vessels, they are strong moral bricks, they are none of these. We have a big vantage point within or without them, within or without the world, Without the world, what does that mean? Does that mean I remember everything? Everything is then coherent?

"Everything" is at least coherent within the stapled boundaries of the document, which refuses to settle on any glib classroom definition of how a text operates. Instead, Mayer provides the shocking example of David Berkowitz to underscore and ironize one of these easy formulations. Here she is also in a veiled sense referring back to a previous work. That David Berkowitz should have been a poet is not inconsistent with the violent narrative of *Studying Hunger*; his crimes were the enactments of his literary efforts, whereas Mayer's literary efforts are the enactment of her crimes. Literature is thus "a way of behaving," rather than a monolith upon which words with undisputable meanings and functions are inscribed. Mayer means, of course, not to valorize Son of Sam, but to underscore the function of writing as an active force, so active that words cannot be characterized as containers (which are hermetic, and which concept separates the "meaning" from the "word"), as vessels (also containers, although they can move), or as too-too solid "moral bricks."

As in *Memory*, Mayer never presents the memories here merely "as was" but always layered with knowledge from the vantage point of the present moment of writing. They accrue to give an almost cubistic — by which I mean composite — portrait of a self, as Messerli, of course, points out. Mayer knows she is making a self-portrait; Messerli rightly calls it "an unveiling." Mayer also knows that the sources of her knowledge are inaccessible to many readers, and this is a problem for her, for she desires communication. Her sentences and statements sometimes become very simple, particularly in these passages from the book's coda:

I am of a different generation from my parents and from my children. I have had a father and an uncle. And some men and women of my generation are of a different age from my own. I am of the female sex, I the speaker. I have a husband who is perhaps your son or brother, or friend. I have a blood relation in my sister and in my daughter. Perhaps you knew my mother or my father. My name is Bernadette Mayer ...

... There is a problem in writing and in writing from my notes I am beginning to see that I make some assumptions about my age and about my language. I expect something and I think you know exactly where I am and what I am doing when that might not be so. I have a memory and a backlog of knowledge and information that is not necessarily complete for you.

Such concern is unusual in the avant-garde tradition, but it is characteristic of the New York School's tendency to disguise their erudition. Ezra Pound, as an extreme example, would not have been quite so accommodating; we either would have been privy to his "backlog" or we would have been cretins. Some of Mayer's contemporaries (Clark Coolidge and Charles Bernstein are some that I've cited in these pages) value the obfuscation and complexity in their writing, and rarely unveil its sources; Mayer herself could hardly be held up as an example of clarity. But her concern here is one that every avant-garde writer has to face, for no matter how one explores the materiality and resonances of language, it is still an instrument, and one does, after all, have "something

to say." Also, having written in difficult forms for years, Mayer may have felt the weight of some of her readers' perplexity. Possibly the experience of motherhood, of reading to her children and teaching them language, had something to do with her concern. She sounds almost guilty when she describes her rich learning and her awe of language:

I have feelings about words and my mind plays classical tricks with them, tricks of conduct, rites of vice, figures of virtue, associative ideals, Greek and Latin studies, the Bible comes in here. Medieval authors wrote to glorify God, some wrote to teach moral lessons, some to earn a living and that's all.

But Mayer's not a medieval writer and her audience is not a medieval audience:

The bourgeois audience is accustomed to listen, at least for a while and it is a useful and understandable act, an art in itself, to be alerted to levels of meaning, to expect to understand.

Mayer too, though, is excluded from some varieties of knowledge, as she tells us, consoling and allying herself with us, those people left behind:

I do not understand the Norman influence on literature, the time of the courtly romance, I do not understand the language of nobility, I understand better this bug on the table. This florid bug.

Her present knowledge of the objects before her attention is more comprehensible, of course, than the "backlog" of human knowledge that is inaccessible to her; likewise, the book in its materiality, taken as "a florid bug," may be more accessible to us than the labyrinthine knowledge of hers the demonic cast in which she presents it:

... and there is the face of wickedness, again the face of my education upon me which I walk backwards like a devil on a moral precipice to cast off. I am loosely guarded, I have a response of love. I cannot be artful yet I cannot fight.

In a painting I am a Chinese woman turning away from a bowl of fruit.

Messerli asks of this last sentence if "this [is] an Eve with a second chance, this time redeeming by giving up that knowledge, by releasing it?" Given Mayer's Catholic background, such an interpretation is probable. But Messerli rightly rejects the limits of that interpretation: "To pin the image down that way is to miss the point, is to turn back to the fruit and eat it." Most readers will not, I think, insist on the Biblical analogy, or at least not merely on it, for they will have been admitted into the mystery of a human mind, formed of knowledge — they will have penetrated

the loosely guarded ring of thought that is my assurance, my goodness, my rock.

Nada Gordon

Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

Poetry

When anybody starts to write they're trying to learn how to write. You do anything you can to do that. You experiment with all the styles and forms and invent new ones. You go back to playing with blocks, you think of words as bricks or windows, you imagine poetry as visual and perhaps lacking in traditional meaning. Even now you can't talk about meaning. If you write then in an obfuscated way or in a way that's reflective of all your experience, you may have discovered something. I think writers should always be allowed by other writers to change their style and be continuously learning, in the process of learning something all the time.

– Bernadette Mayer, from Ann Rower interview, pp. 5-6

The poems in *Poetry*, written over a span of about six years, might serve as examples of the "experiments" I listed in the first section, as they range in style from the manipulated to the automatic, from the personal / daily to the public / linguistic, sometimes incorporating elements from each pole in a single piece. If I were to name a dominant intention in the book (although I'm not sure there is one), considering that *Poetry* was not originally composed as a book, but over several years as autonomous poems) I'd say it was to investigate and "try on for size" the traditions of poetry bequeathed by history. For as well as inventing forms for *Poetry*, Mayer makes her own versions of sonnets and sestinas. In these works she displays the erudition she did not manage (or even want, finally) to purge in *Eruditio Ex Memoria*, utilizing her classical education for creative purposes. But she also flexes her innovative muscles, assembling active little linguistic mechanisms like "Corn":

CORN

corn is a small hard seed

corn from Delft
is good for elves

white corn, yellow, Indian

is this kernel a kernel of corn?

the corn they sought
was sown by night

The Corn Islands are two small islands,
Little Corn Island & Great Corn Island,
on an interoceanic canal route.

any of several
insects that bore in maize is a corn borer.

(p. 7)

Using a ridiculous deadpan tone, talking about a dull subject in an amusing way, Mayer herself is the "corn borer" here — corny and boring. The title underscores the fact that this collection of words revolves around a single signifier's sounds, definitions, and associations. The insistent word "corn" appears at least once in each short stanza, until the reader's memory overloads with its sound and the real object of attention — the "small hard seed" — disappears from his or her mind's eye. Then the poem itself becomes that impenetrable kernel, very much an object; it is to Mayer's prose works what Tender Buttons was to Stein's — focused on the materiality of language rather than its temporal qualities. Mayer says in one of her long works that she wishes she could write short poems. She can of course, and Poetry attests to that. But these shorter works do go against her tendency to be inclusive rather than discrete, and sometimes do seem unnaturally truncated. In some cases, though, these poems are fragments from the earlier inclusive works, taken out of their original contexts (where they may have been hidden) and highlighted. "We've Solved the Problem" originally appeared in *Moving* in prose form; here, recast in lines, the poem's semantic shifts gain effectiveness:

WE'VE SOLVED THE PROBLEM

we've solved the problem, the problem is solved

men are women, women are men

i'm pregnant for a while, you're

pregnant for a while

"if someone doesn't change into an animal,

we won't be saved" someone must
change into an animal so that we can be saved.

a man turns into a cat

a man becomes a cat

he gives himself to his friends in the form

of lead & coal

the man-cat gives himself to us in the

form of lead & coal

he draws himself

with lead & coal, the lead & coal man-cat

draws a picture of himself

he is a girl

the man is a girl – in black & white,

she sings

there are brush fires burning

(p. 58)

The dominant mechanism of this poem is a parallelism of opposites, supporting Gerard Manley Hopkins' claim that "the artificial part of poetry reduces itself to the principle of parallelism." Roman Jakobson agreed, and expanded Hopkins' notion:

Any unbiased, attentive, exhaustive, total description of the selection, distribution, and interrelation of diverse morphological classes and syntactic structures in a given poem surprises the examiner himself by unexpected, striking symmetries and antisymmetries, balanced structures, efficient accumulation of equivalent forms and salient contrasts, finally by rigid restrictions in the repertory of morphological and syntactic constituents used in the poem, eliminations which, on the other hand, permit us to follow the masterly interplay of the actualized constituents.¹

With its seesaw structure, "We've Solved the Problem" fits this formula perfectly: "men are women, women are men" is a perfect mirror image, both rhythmically and semantically; "the man is a girl – in black and white" might be used as a textbook example of semantic opposites. It should be evident how crucial is the role of the enablings in realizing the poem's seesaw motion, even in the most elementary terms of the movements of the eye. Here is the version that appeared in *Writing*. I include the line that precedes it and the line that follows it to illustrate how much more invisible it is in its first context:

save yourselves!" We fly into them. the weeds are iron pipes. WE've
solved the problem. we've solved the problem: men are women,
women are men, i'm pregnant for a while. if someone doesn't change into an
animal we won't be saved. a man turns into a cat, he gives himself to his
friends in the form of lead & coal. he draws himself for them. he is a girl –
black & white – she sings. brush fires.
put out a fat fire with salt, baking soda or cover
the pot. pound cake: 1 lb. butter ...

(*Moving*, p. 23)

This version may be slightly less noticeable than the one in verse, but I remember noticing this passage the first time I read through *Moving*. The bizarre metamorphoses reminded me of Baudelaire or Lautreamont or even a sort of folk tale; the gender elasticity reflected Mayer's utopian ideals. What seems a mythic self-sacrifice ("he gives himself to his friends in the form of lead & coal. He draws himself for them") turns into an artistic gesture. The sudden occurrence of "brush fires" in the final line is a complete surprise, although it can be semantically related to the "coal" of the previous lines. As such it provides a negation of Jakobson's rule of parallelism, and keeps the poem open.

Indeed, to privilege parallelism as Jakobson does is to not take into account relativism and pluralism; Jakobson himself says that "we must be on guard against simplistic binarism." We might in fact characterize Mayer's early work as embodying the world views of relativism and pluralism, whose predominant aesthetic effect would be what a traditionalist would deem "unfinished and uneven." Jakobson does in fact say also that parallelism is a structural device against which some poets rebel:

The obligatory character of the grammatical processes and concepts constrains the poet to reckon with them: either he is striving for symmetry and sticks to these simple, repeatable, diaphanous patterns based on a binary principle, or he may cope with them, when longing for an "organic chaos."²

Jakobson also acknowledges that it is "the most clear-cut and stereotyped forms of poetry [folklore]" that offer the most obvious examples of parallelism. Parallelism thus serves as a kind of poetic norm, the hierarchical structure of which must be "busted" or

rejected. Mayer is of course delighted to break rules, or to follow only those she sets for herself, as her early work demonstrates. *Poetry*, however, is less iconoclastic and more conciliatory than her previous publications, for although she invents many new forms in the course of these poems, some kind of unifying parallelism (whether on the level of sound or syntax or semantics) is almost always evident in them (as it isn't really in *Moving*, for example). Her most obvious bow to tradition can be found in this pair of sestinas:

THE AESCHYLEANS

These berries, with their choices, come to earth
To scatter and confuse the sainted warriors,
A part of crime's return to grace
And the innocence of criminals which
Enervates us like the coarser forms
Of truculence. Rude labors are ordinary and still.

They speed the haphazard. Slow manners still
Desires long buried in the earth
Among the exigencies of place and concurrent forms
Which once frightened even staid warriors.
I have caught a desire for silent markets which
May transfix the movements of warriors. To grace

These corridors with flowers is a chance for grace
As if ancient events were surfeited and still.
These are the plays, the act's discovered ways which
While on earth, will show what the earth
May return to — the severed heads of warriors
No longer dancing with the chance of reeds. The forms

Of edges bring us to such forms.
As homage makes its stonier pledge to grace
Belonging in retribution to the warriors
Whose hearts dispel in plays what is still
And what is closed, close to the attitude of earth.
The arbiter of innocence is a stone which

Is turbulent, and a memory which
No desire affirms, an old resort to forms,
Which forms the quieter winds of earth
And stirs the edges, silent pools, to grace.
The harbored art of influence is still
And silence, buried among the warriors

And the sound of warriors.
The flowers of illusions are the seeds which
Controlling lightning from below, still
The first desire for assault which forms,
Informing turbulence with a sudden ancient grace
The canons are unearthed, but this is not the earth.

The earth is a place for warriors
And for the grace of winds, a steady grace which
When it forms, forms only what is still.

(p. 25)

* * *

THE PEOPLE WHO LIKE AESCHYLUS

These berries, with their choices, come to earth
To bomb and napalm all armies and warriors,
A part of crime's return to grace
& the innocence of criminals which
turns us on like the coarser forms
Of sex. Good labor leaders are shot-gunned and still.

They speed the haphazard. American presidents still
Desires long buried in the earth
Among the free places & free forms
Which still frighten all the staid warriors.
I have caught a desire for free markets which
May transfix the movements of warriors. To grace

Everywhere with flowers is a chance for grace
As if big businessmen were surfeited & still
These are the plays, the act's discovered ways which
While on earth, will show that the earth
May return to — no more warriors
Everyone dancing with the chance of reeds. The forms

Of people bring us to these forms.
But money just throws stones at grace
And makes apologies for the aging warriors
Whose hearts resent in plays what is still
And what is open, close to the attitude of earth.
The arbiter of innocence is a tree which

Looks us over with a memory which
Has no past. What are forms?
Where is the earth.
What is grace?
Power-mad people must be still
And silent, buried among the warriors

And the sound of warriors.
There are no flowers in a civilization which
Grows over what is calm and still
Cutting short the season that forms
People who are jungles of grace.
Many people live in America, but this is not the earth.

The earth is not a place for warriors
But for the grace of winds, a steady grace which
When it forms, forms only what is still.

(p. 26)

Diaphanous and repeatable but not simple, these sestinas create exquisite neo-classical whirlpools of sound and meaning. In structure they mirror each other exactly, down to the line endings. In meaning they present reverse images: the first is the setina of the hawk, the second of the dove. Frequently, they contradict each other: "an old resort to forms" vs. "what are forms?" (an encapsulation, really, of the struggle between tradition and the avant-garde); "The earth is a place for warriors" vs. "The earth is not a place for warriors," and so on. Such contradiction — particularly as regards form — is present internally in each poem as well. Talking about the resort to old forms while writing a sestina in the late 1970s can only be self-reflexive.

The deictic possibilities of the poems raise some interesting questions. In "The Aeschyleans," we need to ask if the "such forms" of the line, "the forms/ Of edges bring us to such forms" refers to sestinas as well as to the "severed heads of warriors." And what about this line from "The People Who Like Aeschylus": "The forms / Of people bring us to these forms"? I'd interpret "these forms" as poetry in general, as a necessary part of fluid life or "grace," but I think other readings are possible (such as "the forms of dancing reeds"). The value of stillness does not seem to be consistent either between or within the poems — quite as its value is undecided in Stein's or Mayer's writings — carrying either a negative or positive meaning: "still" as "dead" ("The harbored art of influence is still/ and buried") or "still" as "calm" ("There are no flowers in a civilization which/ Grows over what is calm & still"). Such ambiguities are the privileges of sestinas, whose blend of repetition and combination will always demand new shades of meaning.

As do all poetic forms, really. Mayer explores such a range in this book I must confess I've revealed only the iceberg's tip. Several of these poems (as do the longer books) reveal Mayer's connections to the art world: one poem, "Selections from SIN IN THE BLEEKERS," was co-authored with the conceptual artist Vito Acconci (who was also her co-editor of the magazine *0-9*), and reads like delicious zaum:

score up my lorcas
Fran had no kanses
train baned in rains lee
nonetheless lillies, lilacs the more als
„the. . . a,,

(p. 46)

Except that, unlike pure zaum, some of this – namely, the odd punctuation in the last line – is unpronounceable and completely conceptual.

Another poem in this book that has ties to the art world is "Earthworks," a direct reference to the earth sculpture of Robert Smithson, whose works (like "Spiral Jetty") were, like Mayer's *Memory*, both monumental and ephemeral, huge but concerned with the passage of time: "Even if the water rises/ We will set up new and deeper memorials/ To the trailing off of our plans." (p. 24)

From "Anthology," a list of lists, to some dream narratives, to several pieces about boats and the sea, to the three-page prose block that begins "untitled what's thought of as a boundless, continuous expanse extending in all directions or in three dimensions within which all material things are contained at this moment ..." to a crystalline translation of Mallarmé, these poems just keep changing and changing, startling in their variety. The book's second section, "Love Poems," though, shows a certain consistency. Personal lyrics, these all assume a fixed "you" (the beloved) and "I" (the poet). They are replete with the personal detail and emotional response of everyday life:

SIMPLE COMPLICATIONS

I wanted you the day after that, you
Which was Sunday or Monday
I gave you a picture of feathers, lost contact & gave it to you again ...

(p. 83)

This "personal" innovation did not make a very good impression on the avant-garde, whose attempts to combat the hypostization of self in the confessional lyric showed in their super-"objective" works (influenced by chance operations, Ponge, Duchamp, Robbe-Grillet, et al.). They also reacted against the academicized confessionalism of Robert Lowell, William Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, and many others, as such a tone

became (and still is) a standard in MOR publications like the *American Poetry Review*. But Mayer is hardly an academic; I see in these poems not the influence of Robert Lowell (certainly not) but the personal "go on your nerve" voices of Frank O'Hara and Ted Berrigan. Her next volume, *The Golden Book of Words* comes to rely on this sort of expression almost exclusively, in many ways acting in counterpoint to what came before.

¹ Roman Jakobson, "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry," *Lingua* 21, (North Holland Publishing Company, 1968), p. 603.

² Jakobson, p. 65.

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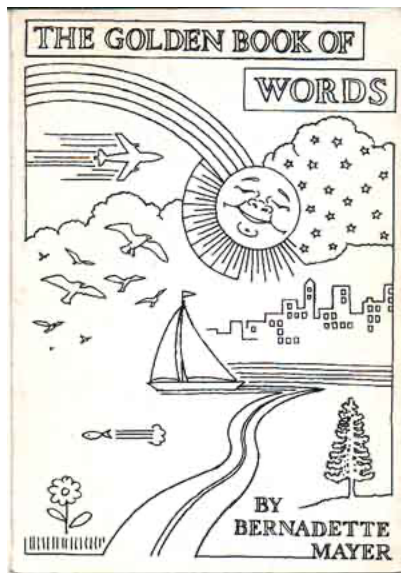
Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

The Golden Book of Words

Ann Rower: I notice that it bothers you what people think even what other poets think and you talk of being criticized as a failed experimentalist. Was it in some way more satisfying to be able to have this kind of dialogue with the butcher and the bakers?

Bernadette Mayer: A hundred times, yes. I never wanted to hang out with poets.

— interview, p. 4



That Mayer felt the brunt of the criticism she received from her fellow avant-gardistes is clear in this doubtful passage from "I Imagine Things," a work in prose format from *The Golden Book of Words*:

It's a fine time to think it

I've got other rhythms and rhyme, time to think it's made by you, made by me, what's the time I think it's a better time to sound it all out, I must have found it all out before, before I saw you, before I met you, I think this time I might know more than before, this is the first time I feel I know it at all or all of it, too many people call, I feel I'm not a good poet, I'm half a poet, I lose my poethood, I don't compose knowing enough, I don't go far enough away, I'm too close to myself, I don't lose myself enough, I must free the language more, I free it too much, and now it's lost, lost to you and others too, I wing it, I wonder about it, I indulge in it, I listen to every word, I sing and I wonder every time, am I doing it wrong, I swim and I flounder, I go and I wander, I see but I go under, and when I am simple it's too simple for you and when I amwait, now I see what others are doing, they're imposing a discipline and saying now I can't speak of myself anymore, I must describe the all of bricks and the little limited visa I've here ...¹

In form this does indeed "describe" (in the sense of "draw") a wall of bricks — a fortress both of and for the self. But this writing is also a response to Mayer's previous writing, which was so inclusive, so risky, that the only aesthetic direction she could have chosen, if she still wanted to maintain her aesthetic of constant change, was a limited personal discourse.

She has a desire to please, not alienate, the reader. With age and motherhood, Mayer has, in a sense, mellowed. As she says in "Abou," "it's time to have an audience/ after having a family." But the ethos of the avant-garde, to constantly make it new, frequently generates works that challenge our presumptions about the world — an uncomfortable sensation. In *Studying Hunger* Mayer said:

And there was another problem. People began to describe my work as rude. Worse than that, they were saying that I was acting rude & mean. Also, I couldn't eat. So I decided to try telling stories again.

(*Studying Hunger*, p. 21)

Here we see Mayer's struggle with both the traditional and avant-garde aesthetic contingents. Her concern for her reader's pleasure and response conflicts with her impulse to make new and often difficult forms, so she inserts apologies like the one we saw at the end of *Eruditio Ex Memoria*.

Barrett Watten, acting as a representative of the progressive contingent, has this to say about her later work:

The "permanent avant-garde" vaporizes, leading to more conventional roles. As actually happened — in the course of Mayer's later editing of *United Artists*, the stylistic opening-up returns all these techniques to the self.²

The problem with the return to the self, according to avant-garde ideology, is that it reifies the alienated Cartesian "I" that emerged along with alienating social structures. To reject or ironize the hypostatized self is to see oneself within the movement of history, not as its omniscient endpoint. Theodor Adorno, however, has a more positive take on the social role of lyric poetry:

In a celebrated later article, "Lyric Poetry and Society" (1951), Adorno was more sympathetic to the symbolists' efforts. Instead of charging them with a desire to accommodate to the estranged object, he now defended their lyrical poetic submersion in language as a desperately needed attempt to rescue personal subjectivity in a reified world, and, in so doing, also preserve language from commercial misuse.³

Bernadette Mayer's stance in her later work is to be the heroine of the personal in an increasingly objectified and objectifying world. As the 1980s progress, her work becomes more determinedly subjective at the same time as it becomes more publicly accessible. This may be a viable way to rescue the problem of the lyric utterance, as may this notion of Charles Bernstein's, whose own work is fraught with the struggle between public and private language:

The considerable achievement of Frank O'Hara is to have a form of poetry largely within the domain of the personal. Note, however, that O'Hara's word "personism" is not "personalism"; it acknowledges the work to be the fronting of another *person* — another mind, if you will, as much as another nature. O'Hara's work *proposes* a domain of the personal, & not simply *assuming* it, fully works it out. His remarkable use of voice, for example, allows, through a musing whimsy in that voice, for fantasy as wild as any surrealist imagines, contained, still, within his proposed boundaries.⁴

Like O'Hara, Mayer does not merely assume the "domain of the personal," but thinks it through in the course of the writing, as we saw in the quotation from "I Imagine Things." And her self-boundaries, like Walt Whitman's, are never wholly impermeable, as this stanza from "Simplicities Are Glittering" shows:

I speak to you as Shakespeare, monitoring feeling
I speak to you as Valery with emotion but about things
I speak to you as Proust, I can't be brief at all
I speak to you hurriedly battering
Or as Gertrude Stein just bantering

Mayer would never assume herself to be a closed and static entity. She speaks a collective language that reveals her self as composite as much as subjectivity, but it is both these things, informed and informing. She never, despite the explicitness of some of these poems, loses her sense of language as material: "Heavy heads and hearts are ready, heavy/ heady homes eating ground chicken hearts, the beefy/ readiness to be here every day" ("Beast of February"). She uses her technical skill to "deliver" her personal experience, as she does in this section of "Baby Come Today, October 4th," one of the most imaginatively written poems about childbirth I have ever encountered:

Ecstatic experiences with nature
This is an automatic furnace
Do not drop or roll
Do not handle with squeeze lift truck
Handle with care
This is a piece of quality assured
Home heating and cooling equipment
The Ohio Valley Container Corporation
Made its container to stand
A resistance bursting test
Of over 200 pounds per square inch
Not an inch a metaphor,
These words are on my window
There is no pane, the first frost comes
The second baby, we'll have to
Turn up the heat, eat nothing
And breathe through a rose

The poem is actually every "inch a metaphor," moving consistently as such throughout: "The pane crashed, baby falls/ Between loose pelvis onto the sheet." Mayer's skill in combining found language with a real event turns the poem into something more than a confession and more than a machine of technique. But this poem and many others in this book do give the impression of being finished aesthetic objects; for example, this poem aims to record and concretize an experience, to give it object-value, and maintains

a consistent metaphor throughout; it achieves a measure of the accessibility Mayer looked for in *Eruditio Ex Memoria*. A book like *Memory* also sought to concretize an experience, but even more to create a new experience, involving or alienating the reader in its perplexity. The poems in *The Golden Book of Words* (named, after all, after a children's book) are far more graspable, temporally and conceptually, less charged with the negative capability of her earlier writings.

Around the time of the writing of this book, Mayer had moved to Lenox, Massachusetts, the hometown of Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of Mayer's favorite writers. She has one unpublished piece⁵ that begins as her autobiography and metamorphoses into his. Like Mayer, he came out of a tremendously repressive environment but was gifted with an unrepressible imagination and verbal skill. Mayer says of him in a recent interview:

Hawthorne's sentences are among the most beautifully written sentences and the most reflective of thought I've ever read in English or in American; I should not even refer to English ... He was ashamed of his obsession with the imaginary because he was a dreamer and a storyteller ... But of course he felt guilty about it ... He also fought the battle between the American language and the English language. When people would write reviews of his books they would say, "He's almost as good as the best of the English writers." He was aware that was not the issue. The issue was that he was an American and that he was writing a different language from those other people ... A different culture always creates a different language. He worked without forebears like many women writers have had to.⁶

Mayer seems to deliberately insert herself into Hawthorne's environment, perhaps to have a reason to be rebellious, but also to be in a secluded environment conducive to child-raising and writing.

To the resolutely unrepressed Mayer, however, "New England is awful" with its "men & women who cant talk/ They wear dark colors & trudge around, all in browns & greys,/ looking up at the sky & pretending to predict all the/ big storms" ("Lookin Like Areas of Kansas"). Several of the poems in this book are concerned with the snow and cold, which Mayer connects to the psychology of the Lenox population:

The streets are covered with ice, I think I've now discovered
All the density and obtuseness
Of the minds of New Englanders

("1978")

But at the same time "New England is interesting" ("1977") and "New England is beautiful" ("1978"). She sees the value in the Protestant temperament, for, unlike New Yorkers who, in their chaotic distraction, their minds full of the world's excesses, the

"accumulation of data" that is *Memory*, won't stop to help a passerby, the stoic New Englanders

When a pregnant woman is stranded in labor in the snow
They'll rise to the occasion and get her out

("1978")

Still, a note of frustration and anger appears in these poems – Mayer's reaction to her proximity to narrow souls like "The librarian [who] said even the black man had the sniffles" and all the other "tedious presentiments in the hearts of the/ Lenox residents / That nothing can ever be changed, no love is vital/ No arousal as final as the weather prediction." That her writing should respond defensively by turning inward seems quite natural, even if that "nature," in Bernsteinian terms, is sheer artifice.

1 Bernadette Mayer, *The Golden Book of Words*, (Angel Hair, 1978), n. pag.

2 Watten, p. 57.

3 Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism*, (UC Press, 1984), p. 270.

4 Bernstein, p. 42.

5 Bernadette Mayer, tape recording of reading given c. 1978, no location given. From the collection of the San Francisco State Poetry Center.

6 Rower Intvw., p. 18

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Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

Utopia



Bernadette Mayer: The painter Rackstraw Downes wrote in a letter the best criticism of *Utopia* in which he said that life without malice would be unendurable. And then later he said that perhaps he meant life without malice would be impossible. Let me read you part of it:

But *Utopia* is really not utopia at all, it is Bernadette's anthology of pet beefs and phobias interspersed with some very jolly and altogether attainable picnics and moments of humanitarian-like concern, and a yearning for an extended (very extended!) family which would include, as it were, oceanic incest ... However, I do not believe in humanitarianism, and I'm glad that the olive oil of endless goodwill and airborne sex will be cut with the vinegar of a plentiful population of landlords, psychiatrists, Nixons, and Watts! For life without malice would be unendurable.

...

Bernadette Mayer: ... in *Utopia* I create this nursery school teacher's world where theoretically nobody is ever unkind to each other.

—from Ann Rower interview, pp. 9-10

The problem with utopias on earth (aside from the fact that they don't exist) is that they are private revisions of the public sphere, and one man's bliss may be another man's idiocy. The virtue of utopias is that they are impracticable; they, like Eden, live only in literature where their function is to be a high ceiling of verbal hope in a real world whose problems are never entirely solvable. Strict materialists have problems with utopias because of their aphysicality. As floating ceilings, sans supports, utopias don't provide more than imaginative shelter from the elements, but they can begin to propose scaffolding for structures on the earth.

The material that builds a utopia is language; a structure in which language is rebuilt with the intention of changing the world is utopian. In this sense all of Mayer's efforts are utopian, as is her exhortation to "work your ass off to change the language." Throughout *Utopia* she expressly does just that, by (as in her other works) employing poetic language, which stretches and redefines the limits of instrumental language, but also by actually redefining words whose meanings are constrictive:

There are still doctors whom you never have to wait to see, when patients (the word patients was changed to people, or, colloquially, leeks) go to a doctor's office (the word office was changed to house ...¹

Although the writing is in a playful spirit, Mayer is assured of the necessity and efficacy of her project: "I guess I mean, how can you not write to change the world? ... Philip Whalen once pointed out to me how silly and shocking it is to think that one's writing doesn't change the world."² The work's playfulness in fact enhances its liberatory gesture; it proposes that a world of benevolent pleasure replace the existing one of exploitative power structures.

The natural scholarly step here would be to put Mayer into the historical context of other literary utopias. Mayer does this for us, both by including an extensive bibliography which includes her models (from Thomas More's *Utopia* to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* to Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*, et al.) and by refusing to hypostatize her self or place in history:

It doesn't matter who I am in the utopian tradition I am no one, no woman no man no person in nowhere like a mad child who answers she is nobody likes nothing and lives no place no new sentence begins with Capitals or is interspersed with subservient commas in the blank period of this writing except in that its author, being not a word processor but a person who is still no one, accommodates to its most easily being read with pleasure, but does not change what it says and thanks you for listening to the beginning of some introduction to the writing of this book though the book will be all introduction and if there's any text which actually says something, it must either be all throughout like dots or in the notes and poems I guess their value (there's the silly I). (p. 13)

This passage exhibits a conflation of tendencies we have seen in Mayer's earlier works: the onrushing syntax of *Moving* and *Memory*, the confrontation with language's object-status (present in all her works but particularly in *Poetry*), and her concern about the status of self (again in all her works but most apparently in *Midwinter Day* and *Golden Book of Words*). Such concern is here, as in her other works, fraught with ambivalence. The "I" is "silly," she is "nobody" but at the same time she is "not a word processor but a person." Language speaks, but so does a person as a willful operator and reinterpreter of language. Yet although she is "a person" she is still "no one"; that very selflessness is

both alluring (as is regression into a primal state) and petrifying (as it signifies loss of individuality and hence control).

The excerpt also reinforces the positive value Mayer gives to textual shifts and transitions (one of the pivotal techniques she learned from the avant-garde tradition and peers and from her study of Lacan); the text's message "must either be all throughout like dots or in the notes and poems." Indeed, transitions thrive in *Utopia*; from chapter to chapter the form changes, and the writing includes deliberate lacunae. One way Mayer has managed to keep the form changing all the time is quintessentially utopian: she designed the book as a collaborative effort which embraces the work of other writers. In this sense it does manage to go a step beyond my definition of utopia as a private revision of the public sphere, for this is a combined vision. John Fisk's list of all the world's leaders, culled from the *World Almanac*, Anne Waldman's description of how the old and sick would be attended to in a perfect society, Rosemary Mayer's description of what utopian chairs would be like, and Bob Holman's index to the book that creates a poem in itself.

Perhaps the most provocative outcome of this collaborative move is when the viewpoints differ. Mayer writes one chapter of *Utopia* in the hyperbolic manner of Jonathan Swift; it is an allegory about a theory-centered group of avant-garde writers colloquially known as the language poets (Charles Bernstein and Barrett Watten, both of whom I have quoted in this thesis, my be said to be part of this group):

The people were very nice and polite, though they were mostly men ... they were clothed in a dull sort of grayish sameness; all had closely shorn hair and many wore spectacles behind which I could detect tiny pale eyes ... each of them was reading a book while we walked. They continued to appear unmoved by my agitated behavior.

At last we reached a huge palace which though large was extremely drab and depressing, and I was led to a room at the entrance of which was an enormous sign, written in English, which said, "Marxist Semiological Eating." I was unceremoniously shown a square chair by a man who, like the others, resumed his attention to his text a moment later. We were all given shoulder of mutton, cut into equilateral triangles, cubed potatoes, an aleatory cole slaw and a cycloidal pudding for dessert. Throughout the meal, one or another of the monks, as I began to think of them, would take turns standing up and making a sort of recitation, as if in a refectory (no one else spoke a word or smiled). Among the chaos of my own emotions, my gratefulness at having found other human beings, my awe at these men's composure, and my astonishment that though we spoke the same language they had no desire to communicate with me as yet — my mind was so distracted that I could not remember all of these confusing speeches, or whatever they were, but certain excerpts did remain with me till I had an opportunity to record them, and now I relate them to you for whatever they are worth: aplumb eblettes iplitty abilullty ebullient scribblier afloont effluvial iffling asslong (at which word everybody tittered so they must have the same devotions as humans) ...

then: lodged in the allomorphs the warm occasional ... you see just as I got interested they would leave off and continue with something like vivo I live voco I call volo I will. Another part that stayed in my mind was the long phrase: trowel ambulate monadology a Conestoga of by a purposelessness whitewsh all imaginable chic distemper ... (pp. 84-6)

As the section progresses, Mayer revolts particularly against what she perceives to be a vilification of emotion in writing: "I was admitted to a class in which the professor was heartily involved in making a case for the whole effect of this university's experimentation being to annihilate emotions. ... He was a fiery and convincing speaker and I could only guess that the word 'emotion' must have replaced what I considered to be all the component-meanings signified by the word 'evil.'" (p. 87) Knowing that her vision of this group of writers was slanted, in part perhaps out of a thorny protectiveness of her own procedure, she invited Charles Bernstein to respond. The result is another allegory entitled "The Only Utopia is in a Now," in which he gently and imaginatively replies to her aspersions. He sets the scene in a place marked by a sign that reads "Utopia"; he mocks the debate over "the nature of the sign":

It wasn't long before those without any names in the story arrived at a big sign that said "Utopia" on the front (on the other side, as Woody Guthrie used to put it, it didn't say anything). But it was a little alarming when one of us, who could read subtexts, pointed out that "Utopia" was inscribed in such a way as to cover over the words "private property." "There's just no getting around it," s/he said, "as long as we even use words like utopia it seems we're playing the same old game," "Holier than thou," said the one who read pretexts, "that's what the sign says." (p. 90)

The party is then approached by "a very large man" who shouts at them that "there was no place for 'unemotional types' here," to which a female Utopian responds that "enemies of emotion are generally humorless, intellectual men." She begins to emit an eerie light that obliterates her image; out of this light a voice, "first halting and then rapid and agitated" begins to speak:

"On this block," the voice was steady now and almost seemed to sing, "what is called 'thinking' is absolutely forbidden in the name of what is called 'emotion.' You're only supposed to write and say what everyone else knows, and to write and say it in the way everyone else has already heard it. In fact, they issue a manual, Acceptable Words and Word Combinations and everyone talks and writes only in permutations derived from this book. It's no use arguing, since anyone who disagrees is called anti-emotional and, regardless of their gender, is also called 'male.' This is what makes everything so topsy-turvy. You see, emotion doesn't express itself only in words we already know. But people here who talk about emotion don't really want to experience it, they only want simulations of it in patterns of words they've already heard. In other words, they only want to hear what they already know, and they call this repetition, which is after all somewhat comforting 'emotion.' But if you speak or write with the syntax of the heart,

saying in words that otherwise cannot be expressed, you're told you're against communication and too intellectual. They make an adversary of the mind, forgetting that a tear is an intellectual thing, as Blake said. In fact, the people here are so ideologically pro-emotion they make it into an abstract concept that is more theoretical than the intellectuality they renounce. ... Don't be afraid, gentle writers, gentle speakers, that you won't communicate or will be too intellectual. Only when such concerns fall away, like calluses from our tongues, and we are just left to do and be, not trying to communicate out of a fear of being unable to, will language take its rightful place as love." (p. 91)

Such a close and poignant dialogue can best be welcomed in a collaborative work, where many I's can have their say within the same physical boundaries. Mayer's is even individually a divided I, a voice with two impulses — to be pleasingly "clear" and to speak with the "syntax of the heart," which sometimes emerges inaccessible and convoluted. Such a divided impulse puts her again smack in the middle of two camps, where we've seen her situated before. The two camps have existed at least since the time of Cicero and Seneca; in Mayer's personal history they may be more closely identified with the terse puritanism of New England and the elaborate Catholic rhetoric of her early education:

Often the apparently unclear parts seem the clearest to me. Yet someone once called me a "failed experimentalist" because of my attempts to be clear, and the fact that I've been able to get any clarity at all into my poetry, or maybe into my prose, could be thought of as either an achievement or a crime, or of course, something else. ... To be simultaneously clear and also inspired, means you are telling the truth which means you are reflecting the motions of human thought. ... It's something that has always fascinated me about obfuscation in writing which is that if you are unclear and still writing something beautiful because of your love for language, you might be in the process of accidentally happening upon the truth. I was almost going to say that other poets perceive your love of language then and often feel you're better off if you're not clear. But when people who aren't poets want you to provide them with the pleasures of poetry, they might request rhymes and the magic of clarity. Truly inaccessible poetry is and has always been celebrated in an academic way also. See, I always held out the hope that my poetry and other people's poetry would be read by everyone ...³

Mayer explores her entire range, from heavily fogged over to crystal clear in this work. Her own sections vary from the prose style we've already seen to verse (with lines like "lupine fields a dozen envelopes speech noon" p. 59) to what is perhaps my favorite section of the book, a chaotic play entitled "A Fish That Looks Like a Bishop: Debate of the Utopians." Its characters include herself, Thomas More, Aristophanes and several characters from a play by Aristophanes, Plato, Margaret Fuller, Hawthorne and Melville, Louisa May Alcott, Sappho, Clark Coolidge, H.G. Wells, William Carlos Williams, and, of course, Gertrude Stein. Like early French surrealist plays, it is composed of surprisingly relevant and very funny non-sequiturs and quotations; it is a

written representation of these literary voices that are speaking in and through Mayer herself.

What strikes me as the most arresting literary maneuver of this book is not formally a part of the text, but is actually the copyright page itself, which I reproduce here to show its full effect. It is Mayer's way of applying utopic principles to the real, legal world:

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Bernadette Mayer, 172 East 4th Street, #9B, New York City 10009; telephone (212) 254-5308.

Mayer thus defines herself as a real and accessible living person (locatable in the physical world by a real address and a real telephone number) attached to her text – rather, in fact, as Hawthorne does in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* – breaking down the modernist stereotype of the detached artist Joyce portrayed as paring his fingernails while surveying his separate creation. She also erases the words “private property” that one of Bernstein’s characters perceived as the subtext to “Utopia.”

As are all of Mayer’s works, *Utopia* is indissolubly connected to the life and world in which it was made, and comes from an attempt to work through the conflicts and separations experienced in that life and that world. Humor and fancy help to pave the bridge its reader travels with a soft carpet; Mayer does achieve one of her foremost goals – to please. I wrote to her that I thought all utopias came out of a desperate impulse – out of a world whose conflicts could never be resolved. She responded: “I ... always want to please, and that is the impulse of utopia, not desperation at all – to imitate or create some forms of perfection (though that’s against the avant garde rules).”⁴ Her maverick stance is surely admirable in a world as codified and codifying as ours.

¹ Bernadette Mayer, *Utopia*, (United Artists, New York, 1984), p. 27.

² Rower Intvw., p. 18.

³ Rower Intvw., p. 4.

⁴ Letter received from Bernadette Mayer, October 12, 1986.

Nada Gordon

Form's Life: An Exploration of the Works of Bernadette Mayer

Conclusion

Bernadette Mayer's prolificacy disallows any complete exploration of all her writings, and the polymorphousness of those writings disallows any easy or imposed totalization. I do hope, however, that I have been able to offer an introductory guide through these poems, and to help expand (if only a little) the audience for Mayer's work. That she walks the tightrope between using language descriptively and using language expressively puts her in the middle of two factions, those who declare that

language is an instrument and those who focus on language as material. Each position is extreme — the first too empiricist, the second too hermetic.

As a person in the middle, Mayer has had to cope with criticism from both ends of the literary spectrum. In her vasatility, she allows that there is a share-able world with share-able truths, but also that some of those truths are ineffable, and can only be gotten at circuitously. She wants simultaneously to describe the world and her life in it, to capture duration; she has a self-described "obsession with time sequences."¹ To capture duration in language is to freeze it so it's not really duration anymore, but material. Mayer has a great love for the thing-ness of language, and does not seem disturbed, as Stein did, by the contradiction between language's fixity and life's movement. She is adept at mimicking life's motions in language's rhythms; she knows also that these rhythms can only be motivated by a human reader — hence her desire to "seduce" and please. Her complexity, her fluidity, her poignant question, "Can I say that?" are related to what Bernstein might call "the syntax of the heart," whose roundabout constructions are paths to the ineffable. The struggle to say what can't be said produces a contagious, almost electric field of desire the willing reader can't help but sense, especially in a poem like "Attempt to Write a Love Poem" that skirts any blatant telling and never even wants to be more than an attempt. She writes it in forty brief prose sections, some of which I excerpt here:

1

Get your dose of color proving what not that proving what but something else proving what true, no longer interested in recording dialogue, top of the stove hot proving what not that but the proving that was circulating last night: 1, 2, 3 people proving what or nowhere.

...

33

All the secrets people keep
Consider this a sleep. This sleep. Is temporary as Shakespeare.

...

40

In the interim I'll sleep, as the thoughts occur to you, design thought that I know how, and, as intelligently as I can, hear a door open & close, willingly, let me know then, how you will ever select, transpose & transmit, the even dream, the long dream, the science dream, the song from the dream. Embrace the dream. My embracing you.

As, the breath was so exhausted from my lungs, that I could go
no farther; & seated myself at the first arrival.

And someone said then: Free yourself for sitting down or under
cover, men come not into fame

Without which who consumes his life, leaves such vestige of self on
earth as smoke in air or foam in water
So conquer breath in time with the mind if with its heavy body
it sinks not down
My embracing you.²

Here Mayer drags the world of sleep into day's harsh light, transforming "the secrets people keep" into the code of poetic language; the desire is not to rend the veil with language but to render the veil in language (or expose the veil as language). The writer gives the galloping syntax of "breath in time with the mind" a form and endurance here, paradoxically as "temporary as Shakespeare." Immediate only within a mind (of writer or reader), even Shakespeare's "immortality" depends on human response, which Mayer earnestly welcomes: "My embracing you." As such, the work of verbal art is not just a bridge from life to world, or from world to life, but from life to life; the reader / writer connection is (ideally, of course, and in Bergson's terms) "a mutual interpenetration of elements." Mayer's efforts, neither insisting on the writer's singularity and omnipotence nor relying solely on the reader's sense of order, testify that this connection need not be perceived as severed in this scrambled and objectifying post-Cartesian thing called modernity.

¹ Rower Intvw., p. 3.

² Bernadette Mayer, "Attempt to Write a Love Poem," in *Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America*, ed. Alan Sondheim (Dutton, NY, 1977), pp. 178-90.

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