

MASS INNOCULATION AGAINST BACTERIA OF DOUBT

PORT AUTHORITY — In late 1977, New York's favorite gonzo-rock journalist, Lester Bangs, wrote a three-part serialized account of touring with English punk / new wave band The Clash for British weekly *New Musical Express*. The assignment found Bangs in a funk, saying things started going downhill for rock about 1968, culminating in the ascendance of things like disco and jazzrock, which are dead enough to suggest the end of popular music as we know it, to the point of thinking about giving up writing about music altogether.

But Bangs was pried out of resignation by a sudden demand for coverage of the U.K. punk scene which, within one year of its initial explosion, was merely repeating the very attitudes it copied (*BOREDOM* and *INDIFFERENCE*) — a sorry state which amounted to capitulation rather than construction. Instead, Bangs was on the trail of a *persistent humanism* in spite of the fact that one of the most uncool things you can do these days is to be committed about anything.

Joining the tour jet-lagged and combative, with a friend's advice to ask "em just exactly what their political program is, what they intend to do once past all the bullshit rhetoric, Lester begins his relationship with the band by unleashing a battery of questions along the lines of *Blah blah blah de-personalization blah blah bla sospisem blah blah yip yap Blah blah no one wants to have emotions anymore blah blip human heart an endangered species blah blare cultural fascism blah blurb etc. etc. etc.* which is immediately met with laughter, then disarmed by the off-hand response: *If it bothers you so much why don't you do something about it?*

In a telling incident, one of the band asks Lester, *my room is full tonight, can Adrian stay with you?*, gesturing at one of the fans. Bangs is outraged, makes a scene, then discovers, to his considerable amazement, that indeed the band regularly houses acquaintances and fans on tour. At which point he is forced to consider the degree to which his own attitude is shaped by his standard experience of large-scale U.S. bands' tours, i.e. *involving golden pigs who have the usual burly couple of hired thugs to keep the fans away from them at all costs*. By contrast, the way the Clash treat their fans falls so far outside the normal run of things as to be outright revolutionary.

From here on, Bangs realizes why it wasn't necessary to do any boring interviews about politics or the class system or any of that — because here is a band which not only preaches something good but practices it as well. The way the band interact with their audience, instead of talking about changes in social behavior puts the model of a truly egalitarian practice in their own conduct. Even better is the band's response to his telling them as much: *Oh, so that's gonna be the hook for your story then?*

Which it is, along with the unanswered question he lets hang: how long the group can continue to practice total egalitarianism in the face of mushrooming popularity?

Well-aware of his proclivity to rant, generalize, polemize, Bangs concludes anyway, saying you may say I take liberties, and you are right, but I will have done my good deed for the day if I can make you see that the whole point is YOU SHOULD BE TAKING LIBERTIES TOO. Nothing is inscribed so deeply that a little eyewitness won't uproot it, that's the whole point of so-called "new wave" — to REINVENT YOURSELF AND EVERYTHING AROUND YOU CONSTANTLY. (DS)

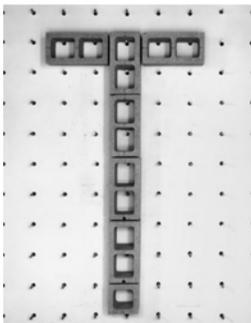
CAP'N SELLERS'S PEN NAME STOLEN

HARTFORD, CT — Like many of his books, Mark Twain's 1883 travelogue *Life on the Mississippi* was published simultaneously in England and the U.S. in an attempt to ensure against piracy on either side of the Atlantic. In it, Twain recounts — among other stories from his young life on the river — the origin of and his decision to use the pen name "Mark Twain" instead of his given name, Samuel Clemens.

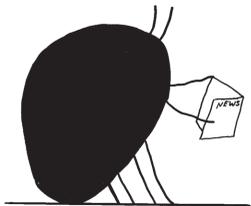
Chapter 50 introduces a captain Twain writes is "now many years dead. He was a fine man, a high-minded man, and greatly respected both ashore and on the river." But he's a two-sided figure: an able sailor on one hand, but a competitive storyteller on the other. His tales were designed to outdo all the rest. As older pilots bragged about their experiences on the river to newer men, Twain writes, "the stately figure of Captain Isiah Sellers, that real and only genuine Son of Antiquity, would drift solemnly into the midst." Captain Sellers "dated his islands back to the misty dawn of river history; and he never used the same island twice; and never did he employ an island that still existed, or give one a name which anybody present was old enough to have heard of before."

Twain continues, "The old gentleman was not of literary turn or capacity, but he used to jot down brief paragraphs of plain practical information about the river, and sign them 'Mark Twain,' and give them to *The New Orleans Picayune*. They related to the stage and condition of the river, and were accurate and valuable; and thus far, they contained no poison. But in speaking of the stage of the river to-day, at a given point, the captain was pretty apt to drop in a little remark about this being the first time he had seen the water so high or so low at that particular point for forty-nine years; and now and then he would mention Island So-and-so, and follow it, in parenthesis, with some such observation as 'disappeared in 1807, if I remember rightly.'"

In an effort to impress his fellow young pilots, Twain signed his first article, a parody of the captain's style, for *The New Or-*



THE FIRST/LAST NEWSPAPER



David Shrigley

leans True Delta, with the name "I. Sellers." When he found out, Sellers "did me the honor to profoundly detest me from that day forth," Twain recalls.

"He never printed another paragraph while he lived, and he never again signed 'Mark Twain' to anything. At the time that the telegraph brought the news of his death, I was on the Pacific coast. I was a fresh new journalist, and needed a *nom de guerre*; so I confiscated the ancient mariner's discarded one, and have done my best to make it remain what it was in his hands — a sign and symbol and warrant that whatever is found in its company may be gambled on as being the petrified truth; how I have succeeded, it would not be modest in me to say."

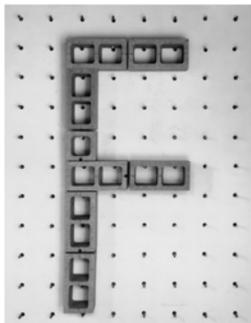
Like Jonathan Swift's Isaac Bickerstaff or Benjamin Franklin's Richard Saunders, Clemens used a pen name to antagonize a competitor. And like Dickens's Boz — which came from "the nickname of a pet child, a younger brother, whom I had dubbed Moses, [...] which, being pronounced Boz, got shortened to Boz" — Clemens kept a pen name not out of spite but as a memento of his youth, a souvenir. Mark Twain represented the best storyteller of them all, casting a long shadow over the young Clemens. Clemens's *nom de plume* was not a mask, but a goal; it created another, separate author inside himself. Finally, like copyright, the serial format, and the printing press, Twain's pseudonym was a text-generating tool: with it, he could make more text and better text at a faster rate than he ever could as Samuel Clemens.

Beyond revealing the origin of his name, however, Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* was unique for another reason: it was the first manuscript to be composed entirely on a typewriter, the Remington Model 2. The typewriter was Twain's second. He had purchased a Remington Model 1 in 1874, just seven years after Christopher Latham Sholes, working with Carlos Glidden and Samuel Soule, had invented it. Sholes described his contraption as "a cross between a loom and a jack-in-the-box, but it could operate faster than a man could with a pen, and all the letters were legible." Sholes's typewriter was not the first — British inventor George Mill had filed a patent for a "writing-machine" shortly after the passage of the Statute of Anne in 1709 — but it was the first to be industrially produced.

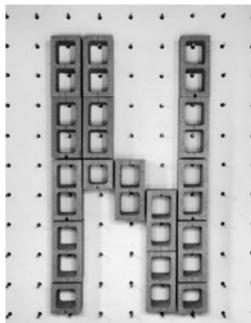
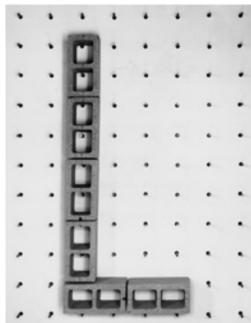
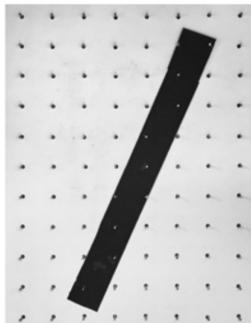
Since the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, the famous firearms manufacturers E. Remington & Sons had turned their wartime production line to the production of domestic goods, like sewing machines. Remington's engineers felt many of the same technologies developed for the sewing machine could be applied to the typewriter. Their version of Sholes's machine sat on a stand "similar to a sewing machine table," according to a 1977 IBM press release on the typewriter's history, and "the carriage was returned by means of a foot-treadle." Remington's advertising noted that the typewriter was "the size of a sewing machine, and an ornament to an office, study, or sitting room."

The similarity to the sewing machine may explain why society was so quick to train women to use the new technology. By 1878, the year the Remington 2 was introduced, schools in New York offered typing courses for students, and soon after that the New York YWCA began offering secretarial instruction to young ladies. Female stenographers would soon be found in better hotels and office supply shops throughout the country, and it was just such a woman who first cast a spell on Twain with the new machine and prompted him to buy it. In his unpublished autobiography — a set of sheets dictated, of course, to a secretary with the aid of a typewriter — Twain recounts his purchase: "Nashby and I saw the machine through a window, and went in to look at it. The salesman explained it to us, showed us samples of its work, and said it could do fifty-seven words a minute — a statement which we frankly confessed that we did not believe. So he put his type-girl to work, and we timed her by the watch. She actually did the fifty-seven in sixty seconds. [...] She did her work on narrow slips of paper, and we pocketed them as fast as she turned them out, to show as curiosities. The price of the machine was one hundred and twenty-five dollars. I bought one, and we went away very much excited. At the hotel we got out our slips and were a little disappointed to find that they contained the same words. The girl had economized time and labor by using a formula which she knew by heart."

But Twain's Remington Model 1 was "full of defects — devilish ones," and he was eager to get rid of it. He gave it first to his friend Howells, who "was reluctant, for he was suspicious of novelties and unfriendly towards them, and I got him to believe things about the machine that I did not believe myself. He took it home to Boston, and my morals began to improve, but his have never recovered.



PORT AUTHORITY, 641 8th Avenue, New York City, NY 10036 18 NOVEMBER 2009



DEXTER SINISTER



A Reconsideration of the Newspaper Industry in 5 Easy Allusions (4): *Sitting Duck or March Hare?*

SPIDERMAN IN WORLD WIDE WEB

TIVOLI, NY — 26,000 newspaper workers lost their jobs in the U.S. between 2008 and the first half of 2009. *Newspaper, The Boston Globe, The Baltimore Sun, and The Philadelphia Inquirer* have closed their foreign bureaus. Revenue from newspaper advertisements declined 28% in 2009. *The Boston Globe* is currently losing more than \$50 million per year. Classified ads, once described by press baron Rupert Murdoch as "rivers of gold," are losing an ever-greater proportion of their income to the Internet. In April, *The Christian Science Monitor* stopped its presses and became the first national newspaper to switch exclusively to the web.

Those nostalgic for ink point to the Internet, the parasite sucking the lifeblood (advertising money and editorial content) from the newspaper industry. It seems people no longer want to pay for their news. *The New York Times* recently offered a pay-for-view online service, but then quickly discontinued it. The hard-copy newspapers and journals that make money online tend to cater for specialist markets. *The Financial Times* online service, for instance, makes money because their customers can't afford not to have it — it effectively serves to augment and extend an existing medium.

Public sphere philosopher Jürgen Habermas reminds us when all this started: "In England, France, and the United States, the transformation from a journalism of conviction to one of commerce began in the 1830s at approximately the same time." It was in the 1830s that newspapers funded solely by advertising were established and it was then that journalism's real crisis began. In the shadow of a fourth estate — which must, finally, meet the interests of capital — there grew an anxiety about the legitimacy of the press itself. The press took on a dual form — the well-informed Dr. Jekyll cast the shadow of the populist Mr. Hyde — the "paper of record" mirrored the "yellow press." And along with this divided self came a class division: the tabloid versus the broadsheet; the mass versus the elite. The masses are led mindlessly toward the spectacular and sensational. Their sensibilities are easily affected; they believe what they are told. The "gullible herd" are set against the "informed individual," master of his own destiny — as rational, as reasoned, and as balanced as his opinion.

But today, the anxiety about the legitimacy of the press — born on the morning of capital's monopoly of opinion — has traveled effortlessly from the ink clinging to pages of *The Washington Post* to the electron interface of the news blog *The Huffington Post*.

The Huffington Post even recently created an award for online journalistic excellence, similar to print's Pulitzer Prize — the press continues the wrestle its own shadow. Joseph Pulitzer, following the logic of the Other dwelling within the Self, both instituted the practice of sensationalist "yellow journalism," and established the world's first school for journalism. It seems that the press must feed back its pitch for legitimacy again and again; this is how it mythologizes the story of how fair, balanced, and rational it is.

While hard-copy papers nose dive, news blogs like *TPM (Talking Points Memo)*, *The Daily Dish* and *The Atlantic* are attracting advertisers and hiring staff. *The Atlantic* received 13 million page views in June 2009; *The Huffington Post* is able to sustain a Washington bureau with seven reporters and editors (including Dan Froomkin, formerly of *The Washington Post*). And this at a time when some newspapers (including *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*) have pulled their correspondents out of Baghdad. This fall-off has been picked up, in part, by the blog *The Global Post*, which was kick-started with a \$10 million investment package at the beginning of 2009. They plan to take over the business that the nationals are finding it hard to sustain.

The account of the blogosphere as parasitical nemesis of the fourth estate becomes less credible because we seem to be seeing the formation of a different kind of news service. The fact that people can get information free online hasn't only changed the financial dynamic it has also shifted the dynamic of legitimacy — do I trust *The New York Times* or *The Daily Dish*?

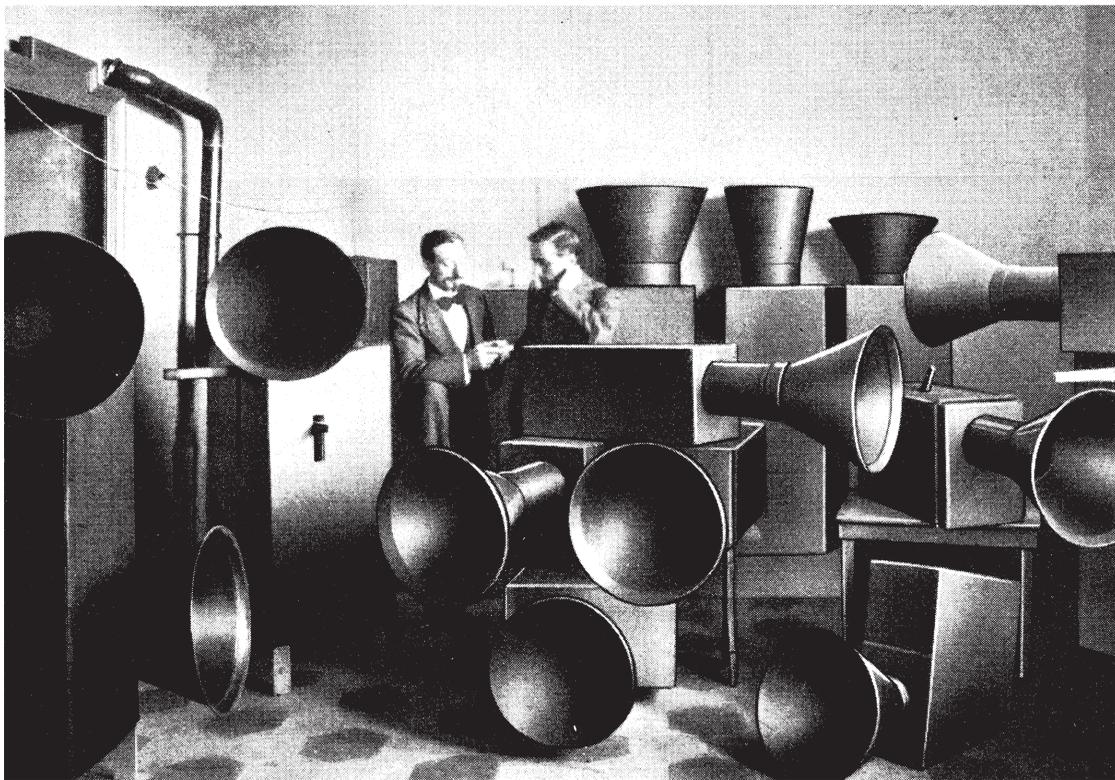
Whether I take my news over breakfast or over the wireless connection, I still, somewhere in the back of my mind, believe in the superhero reporter. It's no coincidence that Superman and Spider-man both work for the press. Clark Kent is its witness (the reporter) and Peter Parker its forensic department (the photographer). Both work for truth and justice, but in order to protect their secret identities, Clark sometimes has to bear false witness and fake stories, and Peter has to tamper with the evidence and fake pictures. "I'm still waiting for the first blogging superhero, but when he or she does appear, what media myths will they carry over to the blogosphere?"

Since its birth the modern media has been living with the contradiction between private (corporate) interests and the model of the public sphere. The liberal model teaches that information should be accessible and "public." This expectation was carried over to the Internet where the demand for freedom of speech is tempered by the anxiety that the "checks and balances" that might apply to the established media might not apply to the web.

However, the notion of the media as the forum in which things can be tested for their truth and exposed as false, or the notion of "objectivity" within the press, is something that passed over from scientific discourse into the world of journalism — blogs and newspapers, despite their differences, both preserve the regulative fantasy of press freedom and objectivity.

What we can say for certain is that blogs and newspapers are sites for the production of truth claims. Lots of blogs exist to propound the standpoint of a particular government, NGO, or special interest group — and the vast majority make links to like-minded people. Claims as legitimate truth-speakers come not just from "objective" journalists, but from "vested interest" groups and may be even "conspirators." The issue isn't whether the press is more reliable as a news source than the TV or Internet, but whether the press is still regarded as the legitimizing agency. There is evidence that people are more likely to trust a particular journalist or blogger over a particular newspaper and readers are certainly as mindful of vested interests within the newspaper industry as they are on the World Wide Web.

Histories of journalism show there never was a stable state in which the scientifically-objective truth could be told. Those histories are actually histories of legitimacy being contested — "popular," "yellow" journalism existing alongside the "journal of record." How to deal with "illegitimate" voices that are, in fact, structural parts of the discursive space of the media will continue to be the real issue at stake. (SR)



Music for 16 Futurist Noise-Intoners. Luigi Russolo and Ugo Piatti with the intonarumori (1913). Courtesy Something Else Press and Primary Information

He kept it six months, and then returned it to me." Twain then tried to unload it on his coachman, Patrick McAloer, "who was very grateful, because he did not know the animal, and I thought I was trying to make him wiser and better. As soon as he got wiser and better he traded it to a heretic for a side-saddle which he could not use, and there my knowledge of its history ends." Passing, like Twain's own pen name, from one person to the next, it seemed the Remington Model 1 had a mind of its own. (RG)

HOW MARINETTI TAUGHT ME HOW TO WRITE

LONDON — I'm going to start in the most un-Futurist of places: in the Renaissance, on a hillside in Spain. In Book One of *Don Quixote*, the novel's manic hero and his sidekick, Sancho Panza, listen to a group of flogging mills, the grinding and clanking of whose machine-parts Don Quixote mistakes for the growling and snarling of monsters. Unlike the famous "windmill" scene to which Picasso would later give such iconic visual form, this episode is characterized by a complete lack of vision: in the pitch black of the night, only sounds and rhythms carry to the characters, and hence the readers. The episode is also marked by a pungent olfactory undercurrent: Sancho, desperate for the toilet but loath to abandon his misguided master, spends the scene fighting a losing battle with his bowels, resulting in a foul odor permeating the night air.

Sancho's master, of course, is wrong: what they are hearing is not monsters but machines. Then again, he's right, completely right, in the profound, intuitive way that only madmen can be: through the white noise of his delusion, he's picked up a signal forseen in time's static, and tuned into an announcement, not yet officially delivered, of the age of mechanized industry lurking in the night of the future. What's being transmitted in this, in the looping procession of broken syllables, the clashing meter of compounded phonemes, is a logic and aesthetic of technology — a technologies — which his prophetic mania is giving life to, animating. And beneath this, pungent and ignorable, the smell of matter.

This "technologies" is most commonly ascribed to Futurist founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. But Marinetti didn't invent it. It was swelling in Cervantes. It was cresting in the work of the Romantics, in the "dark, satanic mills" and "belching, sullen fires" of their imagination. What is Blake's tiger but technology, a furnace-born contraption shaped by hammers, anvils, chains? What is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's creation if not the product (or by-product) of laboratories and factories? Or De Quincey's opium if not a physical affirmation that the sublime — joy, beauty, truth — can be produced in test-tubes, measured out in phials and transported nightly on the mail coach down to London? Nor did Marinetti see this technologies through to its completion: its white foam has continued rattling the shingles of late twentieth and early twenty-first century literature, in the mechanical fantasies of J.G. Ballard or the V2 poetics of Thomas Pynchon. But (to stick with the oceanographic conceit that Marinetti, a fan of sharks, would have approved of), the moment that the wave of this technologies broke — erupted, roared, converted its stored-up energy into kinetic force — is 1909, with a manifesto wrapped up in a car crash that itself is rendered in the literary mode of fiction (even if the famous crash recounted in "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" actually happened, the way that it's recounted, pumped up to the gills with symbolism and rhetorical bombast, makes it a narrative, a fiction). And, to hark back to the Spanish hillside, we shouldn't forget that it's a recreation, actually of the aesthetics of technology combine with the base materialism of waste: the ditch into which Marinetti's "beautiful shark" veers and overturns is full of black industrial sewage which he laps up lovingly, telling his readers: "it reminded me of the breast of my Sudanese nurse."

I'm not going to write about Marinetti's novels here, for the simple reason that they just don't grab my cherries. I'm sorry to admit that I can never get more than twenty pages into *Mafarka the Futurist*. What ex-

plains me, as a novelist, about Marinetti, are his manifestos. Their scope seems much wider, their potential richer, more productive. In them, he's engaging directly, almost viscerally, with the "drivers" behind writing — that is, the source-code or conceptual structures underlying the very act or practice of it and the way we understand it, or it understands itself. He manages to do this even when not talking about writing *per se*: in *Let's Murder the Moonshine*, echoing Carra's exhortation in "The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells" to "destroy the sentimental mimeticism of apparent nature," he systematically replaces all the objects that a naturalist intelligence would assume to be the origin and subject of literature — woods, moonlight, even the sun itself, source of all visibility and possibility of all representation — with sulphur, potash, silicates, exploding crucibles of barite, aluminum, and manganese, as he proclaims the "fusion of a new solar orb that soon we shall see shine forth." Compounded and synthetic struggle is in once the medium through which the world reveals itself to us, the thing revealed (the thing our art should represent), and the mode in which our art should do this. In an ultra-literary moment halfway through the tract, Marinetti gazes down from his blue aeroplane and, seeing a flock of sheep that woolly embody the pastoral origins and history of poetry, admits he "loved them once" but, renouncing his former "insipidity," exclaims: "The recds that once we shaped to shepherd's pipes now mark the armor of this plane!"

Which brings us to war. It seems to me that to write off Marinetti's evident love of war as an aberration on the part of an otherwise brilliant thinker, or to explain it away as an unfortunate symptom of a violent epoch, is to miss the point. War — as a practice or experience or environment — is central to his whole aesthetic. The "religion-morality of speed" of which he anoints himself high priest is, he writes in 1916, "born this Futurist year from our great liberating war." But what war, essentially? For Marinetti, it's not a means for a state to acquire power or for one ideology to confront another, but rather a trigger for the breaching of the limits of that stolid humanist and bourgeois bastion, the self. When he writes that "blood has no value or splendor until it is freed from the prison of the arteries," he's envisaging a type of subjectivity that runs beyond the borders of that bastion, spilling over into space. "I don't end where my body or my thoughts end; rather, I continue through trajectories of ordnance, flight-paths of bullets. Man, prophetic mania is giving life to, animating. And beneath this, pungent and ignorable, the smell of matter."

In war, man becomes networked, and is thus revealed to himself as what he always already was, or should have been. In war, space becomes *haptic*: close-up, tangible, and geometric, which is how we should have seen it in the first place. In his manifesto on "Dynamic and Synoptic Declaration," Marinetti instructs followers to gesticulate in a "draughtsmanlike, topographical" manner, synthetically creating in midair cubes, cones, spirals, and ellipses, like so many fighter-planes; in his "Manifesto of Futurist Dance," he envisages one dancer emulating the parabola of shrapnel and another, playing the role once more of aviator, moving above the grid-squares of a map. In "Manifesto of Aeropainting," he goes one step further: after starting out imagining what painting from an aeroplane might consist of, he ends by realizing that the act of flying is painting in-and-of itself, an "aeroculpture" formed through a "harmonious and signifying composition of colored smokes offered to the brushes of dawn and dusk, and long vibrant beams of electric light."

Painting, or writing. This is mark-making in its most literal, material form: a trace with an electric glow. Electricity figures prominently in Marinetti's thinking on writing; in *Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility*, he praises electricity's "lyric initiative," claiming that, "Nothing is more beautiful than a great HUMMING central electric station that holds the hydraulic pressure of a mountain chain and the electric power of a vast horizon, synthesized in marble distribution panels bristling with dials, keyboards, and shining communicators. These panels are our only models for the writing of poetry. For precursors we have gymnasts and high-wire artists who, in their evolutions, their rests, at the cadences of their muscularity, realize the sparkling perfection of the precise gears and the

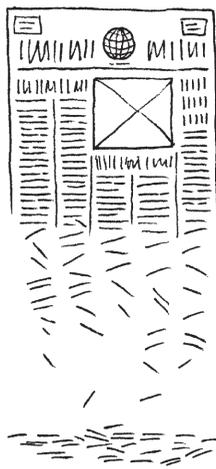
geometric splendor that we want to achieve in poetry with words-in-freedom."

Electricity: the medium of circuits, grids, and loops. It's a conception of writing — a brilliant one — that's only possible when it goes hand in hand with a conviction that the self, too, is relayed, switched, stored, and converted, distributed along the circuitry and grids of networks that both generate it and exceed it.

On literature itself, directly — how to write — Marinetti has instructions to dispense, of course. In his "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature" he encourages compounding ("man-torpedo-boat," "crowd-surf," and so on), the exclusive use of the infinitive, the casting of wide image-nets, a prevalence of onomatopoeia, and so on. I think of it as the "rat-tat-tang-boom-fiii-siii" side of Marinetti. From a formal point of view, it's interesting — but it's not, for me, the most interesting thing he has to say on the subject of writing. The real money, in that manifesto, comes a little later, when he attacks what he calls "psychology" — that is, the "I" of logic and of reason. "We must," writes Marinetti, "drive [this 'I'] from literature and finally put MATTER in his place, matter whose essence must be grasped by strokes of intuition, the kind of thing that the physicists and chemists can never do."

Maybe, just maybe, all the rat-tat-tang-boom-fiii-siii stuff is a distraction; maybe even Marinetti got distracted and, in acting out his own instructions, missed the most incisive part of them. If I'm right (and I may well not be), then the great Futurist novel is certainly not *Mafarka*, nor is it *Crack!*: the great Futurist novel is *Ulysses*, the epic whose true heroes are vibrating tram-lines, jingling bell-posts, and a bar of soap; whose cosmic vision is of spinning gasballs and frozen rock, of "existences concealed in cavities of the earth, beneath removable stones, in hives and mounds, of microbes, germs, bacteria, bacilli, spermatozoa"; whose episodes, like Marinetti's car crash or Quixote's night, are permeated by the smell of excreta. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the bulk of *Ulysses* was written in Trieste, the city Marinetti called "our beautiful powder-keg", nor, perhaps, that its inciting incident involved a gun being discharged over Joyce's head in a Martello tower, a bunker for the military surveillance of space's vectors and approach-lines, whose middle floor consisted of a gunpowder magazine and on whose roof a cannon sat: a gun inside a gun.

The paradox here is that Joyce never considered himself a Futurist. And that the fic-



R.O. Blechman and Nicholas Blechman



John Russell at Barefoot in the Head futurist poetry reading, 12 November 2009. Photograph by Mark Beasley. Courtesy of the artist and Performa

QUICK CROSSWORD

THE BASTARDS ARE MAKING IT UP!

GLASGOW — It takes some nerve to make it up and serve it to the public as if it was straight from the eyes to the fingers, punched out before the smoke has even settled. Readers, though, have a high tolerance for grifters, if they can pull it off with style.

One of the first was one of the boldest. Daniel Defoe published his firsthand account of the 1665 Plague of London in 1722:

"It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbors, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland. . . . We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumors and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men, as I have lived to see practiced since. . . . But such things as were gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth only; so that things did not spread instantly over the whole nation, as they do now. But it seems that the Government had a true account of it, and several councils were held about ways to prevent its coming over; but it was all kept very private."

Defoe would have been five when the outbreak occurred but he had access to his deceased uncle Henry's journals and the published account is signed with the initials H.F., signaling the odd collaboration. In a few lines, he manages to cover two of the key elements in a good feature article — a national trauma and a government cover-up. He also makes it clear that the usual role of the journalist was to provide "hard news," facts gleaned from traveling merchants reported for traders planning their next investment. It is not a coincidence that one of the most successful Internet newspaper firewalls today exists around *The Financial Times*, where readers are willing to pay for reliable analysis of national situations.

If news prose is stripped to the bone, it's because time is precious and the process has

to be repeated each day. The feature article, however, defies gravity. It offers wide-open expanses — maybe as much as 40,000 words — and that kind of space allows for character, detail, setting and mood, detours. . . .

There are writers who've taken this freedom and run with it; too often this has been defined as "new journalism." Tom Wolfe, who made the phrase famous with his anthology of potential "new journalists," argued that there'd been some indication of previous attempts by earlier writers to fuse style, factual reporting, and adventurous prose. His list, from Defoe through Dickens, Thackeray, Twain, and Orwell really proved that there was nothing "new" going on, simply that the opportunity for such writing surged and ebbed with the economies of the news and publishing industries. There was something emerging from the '60s onwards that positioned itself against the very idea of "news." Heretofore as it may seem, the roots of this turn may lie beyond journalism in the wider world of the human sciences, in anthropology, for instance, where Clifford Geertz advocated a new examination of culture through what he termed "thick description":

"Looked at in this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse. . . . As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly — that is, thickly — described."

Roland Barthes had already demonstrated what such a "thick" description might be like in *Mythologies* (1957) when he analyzed the current issue of a leading French magazine.

"And here is. . . another example: I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes upflashed, probably fixed on a field of the tri-color. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am there-

fore again faced with a greater semiological system."

What Barthes proves is that the revolution that occurred in writing features was not just a question of writing an abbreviated neo-realist novel for a magazine. It was about writing that took apart orthodox beliefs in what constituted the news and what the news was really telling us. "There may be the occasional novelistic grace note in the long feature but it is often used counterintuitively, to undermine the cult of information. In the lead to "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," for example, Joan Didion begins the account of murderer Lucille Miller with the following paragraph.

"This is a story about love and death in the golden land, and begins with the country. The San Bernardino Valley lies only an hour east of Los Angeles by way of the San Bernardino Freeway but it is in certain ways an alien place: not the coastal California of subtropical twilights and the soft westerlies off the Pacific but a harsher California, haunted by the Mohave just beyond the mountains, devastated by the hot dry Santa Ana wind that comes down through the passes at 100 miles an hour and whines through the Eucalyptus windbreaks and works on the nerves. October is the bad month for the wind, the month when breathing is difficult and the hills blaze up spontaneously. There's been no rain since April. Every voice seems a scream. It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows."

It's both crime scene and long-range weather forecast. Didion keeps the details of murder at bay here because she knows that a "news" piece would rush through the facts towards a hasty conclusion, missing something darker and elliptical along the way.

Other feature writers have used their freedom to wreak havoc on the sobriety of reporting protocols. Michael Herr whipped across those rules in Vietnam, pulling language out of its sockets with such ferocity that Fredric Jameson cited his passage from *Dispatches* as evidence of a new, postmodern word order: "As long as we could have choppers like taxis it took real exhaustion or depression near shock or a dozen pipes of opium to keep us even apparently quiet, we'd still be running around inside our skins like something was after us, ha ha, La Vida Loca. . . . In the months after I got back the hun-

dreds of helicopters I'd flown in began to draw together until they'd formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, fluenter-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluid, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jangle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and a door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder. Men on the crews would say that once you'd carried a dead person he would always be there, riding with you."

This new language or methodology often reflects the tremendous burden of the story on the storytellers themselves. Recalling his landmark article tracking the rise of AIDS ("The Plague Years"), David Black admits: "I'd thought about the impact the piece might have on the magazine's readers. But not about its impact on me."

"Researching and writing about any subject was always an education — but what I was learning while doing the AIDS article was less about the subject than about myself: my own fears, biases, paranoid, and assumptions."

"AIDS first challenged, then shattered, the journalistic distance I usually kept from a subject. I have not written an extended piece of journalism since."

Other writers, though, point out the dangers of not pushing themselves. Remembering how he became a *Rolling Stone* correspondent Joe Eszterhas writes:

"Most of the reporters I was working with were dead. Oh, sure, they did their daily breathing, and at one time in their lives they may have had ambitions, but over the years their ambitions had reduced them to their weekly paychecks. I wanted to write. . . . And I didn't want to die. . . ."

Ten years earlier a youthful Tom Wolfe had looked out across the city room of *The Herald Tribune* for the first time and experienced an immediate revulsion: "The crowd in Jameson cited his passage from *Dispatches* as evidence of a new, postmodern word order:

"As long as we could have choppers like taxis it took real exhaustion or depression near shock or a dozen pipes of opium to keep us even apparently quiet, we'd still be running around inside our skins like something was after us, ha ha, La Vida Loca. . . . In the months after I got back the hun-

ders of helicopters I'd flown in began to draw together until they'd formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, fluenter-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluid, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jangle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and a door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder. Men on the crews would say that once you'd carried a dead person he would always be there, riding with you."

This new language or methodology often reflects the tremendous burden of the story on the storytellers themselves. Recalling his landmark article tracking the rise of AIDS ("The Plague Years"), David Black admits: "I'd thought about the impact the piece might have on the magazine's readers. But not about its impact on me."

"Researching and writing about any subject was always an education — but what I was learning while doing the AIDS article was less about the subject than about myself: my own fears, biases, paranoid, and assumptions."

"AIDS first challenged, then shattered, the journalistic distance I usually kept from a subject. I have not written an extended piece of journalism since."

Other writers, though, point out the dangers of not pushing themselves. Remembering how he became a *Rolling Stone* correspondent Joe Eszterhas writes:

"Most of the reporters I was working with were dead. Oh, sure, they did their daily breathing, and at one time in their lives they may have had ambitions, but over the years their ambitions had reduced them to their weekly paychecks. I wanted to write. . . . And I didn't want to die. . . ."

Ten years earlier a youthful Tom Wolfe had looked out across the city room of *The Herald Tribune* for the first time and experienced an immediate revulsion: "The crowd in Jameson cited his passage from *Dispatches* as evidence of a new, postmodern word order:

"As long as we could have choppers like taxis it took real exhaustion or depression near shock or a dozen pipes of opium to keep us even apparently quiet, we'd still be running around inside our skins like something was after us, ha ha, La Vida Loca. . . . In the months after I got back the hun-

ders of helicopters I'd flown in began to draw together until they'd formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, fluenter-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluid, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jangle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and a door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder. Men on the crews would say that once you'd carried a dead person he would always be there, riding with you."

This new language or methodology often reflects the tremendous burden of the story on the storytellers themselves. Recalling his landmark article tracking the rise of AIDS ("The Plague Years"), David Black admits: "I'd thought about the impact the piece might have on the magazine's readers. But not about its impact on me."

"Researching and writing about any subject was always an education — but what I was learning while doing the AIDS article was less about the subject than about myself: my own fears, biases, paranoid, and assumptions."

"AIDS first challenged, then shattered, the journalistic distance I usually kept from a subject. I have not written an extended piece of journalism since."

Other writers, though, point out the dangers of not pushing themselves. Remembering how he became a *Rolling Stone* correspondent Joe Eszterhas writes:

"Most of the reporters I was working with were dead. Oh, sure, they did their daily breathing, and at one time in their lives they may have had ambitions, but over the years their ambitions had reduced them to their weekly paychecks. I wanted to write. . . . And I didn't want to die. . . ."

Ten years earlier a youthful Tom Wolfe had looked out across the city room of *The Herald Tribune* for the first time and experienced an immediate revulsion: "The crowd in Jameson cited his passage from *Dispatches* as evidence of a new, postmodern word order:

"As long as we could have choppers like taxis it took real exhaustion or depression near shock or a dozen pipes of opium to keep us even apparently quiet, we'd still be running around inside our skins like something was after us, ha ha, La Vida Loca. . . . In the months after I got back the hun-

ders of helicopters I'd flown in began to draw together until they'd formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, fluenter-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluid, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jangle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and a door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder. Men on the crews would say that once you'd carried a dead person he would always be there, riding with you."

This new language or methodology often reflects the tremendous burden of the story on the storytellers themselves. Recalling his landmark article tracking the rise of AIDS ("The Plague Years"), David Black admits: "I'd thought about the impact the piece might have on the magazine's readers. But not about its impact on me."

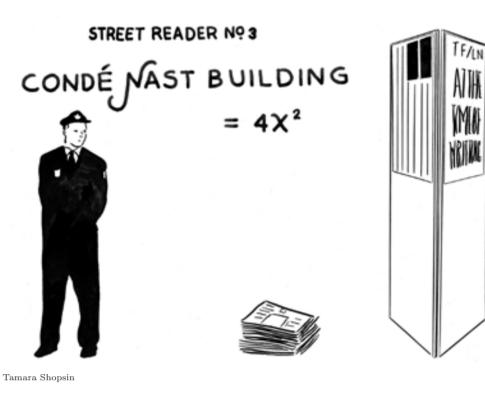
"Researching and writing about any subject was always an education — but what I was learning while doing the AIDS article was less about the subject than about myself: my own fears, biases, paranoid, and assumptions."

"AIDS first challenged, then shattered, the journalistic distance I usually kept from a subject. I have not written an extended piece of journalism since."

Other writers, though, point out the dangers of not pushing themselves. Remembering how he became a *Rolling Stone* correspondent Joe Eszterhas writes:

"Most of the reporters I was working with were dead. Oh, sure, they did their daily breathing, and at one time in their lives they may have had ambitions, but over the years their ambitions had reduced them to their weekly paychecks. I wanted to write. . . . And I didn't want to die. . . ."

Ten years earlier a youthful Tom Wolfe had looked out across the city room of *The Herald Tribune* for the first time and experienced an immediate revulsion: "The crowd in Jameson cited his passage from *Dispatches* as evidence of a new, postmodern word order:



Tamara Shoppin

ITSELF FEELS LIKE THE LAST OF SOMETHING

Prisoner: Where am I?
Number 2: In The Village.
Prisoner: What do you want?
Number 2: Information.
Prisoner: Which side are you on?
Number 2: That would be telling. We want information, information, information. . . .
Prisoner: You won't get it.
Number 2: By hook or by crook we will.
Prisoner: Who are you?
Number 2: The new Number 2.
Prisoner: Who is Number 1?
Number 2: You are Number 6.
Prisoner: I'm not a number. I am a free man.
Number 2: Ha, ha, ha, ha. . . .

JULY 17 — I decide to check into the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles because the heat and disarray of my apartment became too distracting for me to complete two overdue essays I am working on. The three nights are a birthday gift, accepted out of desperation and justified by the cheapness of the reservations (procured via Priceline, \$75 / night). It seems the Bonaventure has some difficulty filling its enormous structure.

The hotel is a thirty-five-story, glass-enclosed cylinder with four smaller cylindrical towers around its periphery. The complex comprises 1354 guest rooms, 94 suites, and 41 hospital-ity suites. Its entrances are scattered at several levels, and once one is inside, it's unclear which is ground level. A mug in the shape of the hotel can be obtained from the rotating bar on the top floor. While I imagine spending a couple evenings up there consuming drinks from the commemorative mug, I never make it. The whole place feels like a 1980s furniture store: black and purple carpeting is accented by gold-colored fittings. Events on this particular weekend include the "International Youth Competition," and middle-aged parents can be seen shepherding groups of children around the building with small national flags clipped to their backpacks. When I check in, pretenses are wandering around the lobby wearing ballerina outfits, marching band uniforms, sequined tuxedos, and the like. One child is dressed as a puffy metallic dinosaur; I try to imagine what competition he might be a part of and what his chances are of winning.

Cultural critic Fredric Jameson famously used the Bonaventure as an example of "the cultural logic of late capitalism." I'd read that Jameson essay while an undergraduate at the previously mentioned small liberal arts college. His descriptions offered a mental respite from the humid, mosquito-infested, not air-conditioned, gothic melancholia of upstate New York in the summer-time. They made me salivate. I dug up the book in preparation for my trip and found the passage underlined in ballpoint pen.

"The Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city (and I would want to add that to this new total space corresponds a new collective practice, a new mode in which individuals move and congregate, something like the practice of a new and historically original kind of hyper-crowd). In this sense, then, the mini-city of Portman's Bonaventure ideally ought not to have entrances at all (since the entryway is always the seam that links the building to the rest of the city that surrounds it), for it does not wish to be part of the city, but rather its equivalent and its replacement or substitute. . . . The Bonaventure. . . is content to 'let the fallen city fabric continue to be in its being' (to parody Heidegger); no further effects — no larger protopolitical utopian transformation — are either expected or desired."

Rereading this passage prompted me to extend my stay. Further, I decided to bring no provisions and to avoid setting foot outside of the hotel.

JULY 18 — The hotel towers are coded red, yellow, green, and blue. This makes me think of Rodchenko's monochrome paintings, *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color*, of 1921. These were Rodchenko's "last paintings," and the building itself feels like the last of something. There's a plaque in front of the red elevator that informs the visitor that *True Lies* was filmed here, but it is unclear whether or not it is referring to the lobby, the hotel, or this particular elevator. *True Lies* was shot when Schwarzenegger's career had hit its plateau: failures like *Eraser* and his transformation into a Green Republican governor were still years off. The hotel itself feels like this late version of Schwarzenegger: overmated, with overly-taut skin whose plastic quality speaks to its age and a physique inappropriate for a sixty-year-old.

Later, I decide to go back downstairs to avoid the cost of room service. I get off on a fourth-floor landing where I remember seeing a coffee shop. It looked as though the shop was on this floor, but I was wrong. The elevators stop only on odd-numbered floors below six. From my vantage point, the coffee shop is only a short distance away, but getting there requires a counterintuitive walk through several zigzagging stairways. From one of the third-floor landings, the coffee shop is again visible, and after some time I find my way to it. Again, I think of Jameson:

"Here the narrative stroll has been underscored, symbolized, refixed, and replaced by a transportational machine which becomes the allegorical signifier of that older promenade we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own."

Thinking of the building as a massive ornamental machine gives me some comfort. He goes on:

"I am more at a loss when it comes to conveying the thing itself, the experience of space you undergo when you step off such an allegorical device into the lobby or atrium, with its great central column, surrounded by a miniature lake, the whole positioned between the four symmetrical residential towers with their elevators, and surrounded by rising balconies capped by a kind of greenhouse roof at the sixth level. I am tempted to say that such space makes it impossible for us to use the language of volume or volumes any longer, since these last are impossible to seize."

I had thought I might write about the hotel, but Jameson was right — it's indescribable. The building itself feels like watching an old movie about a future time that happens to be the time when you're watching it. Exhausted by the book, I leave it at the Italian Coffee Express. The coffee is awful.

When I return the next day, the book is still on the table where I was sitting, as is my empty cup. The shops located on the third and fourth floors feel half-abandoned; the fourth is in better shape in part because it has the only recognizable chain restaurant, a Subway sandwich shop. The majority of the other lunch places serve an odd mish-

