

**ERLIK NOONAIN**

from *VERS: AN ESSAY ABOUT PAUL BLACKBURN*  
Chapter 8 – Newsreel Auteur Eye  
(In . On . Or About The Premises)

On arrival, a circumspect thought halts, faced with savage looks from the slick eye of convention, and ready replies from its rough tongue. But as “the clash of the first” dies down, ease falters; thought helps it to its feet, so the work goes on. It’s true that the bleared image of some solitary walker turning wherever his steps take him offers instruction and no comfort. Yet without such an image, what else is the New World but a soulless witness? Learning which aspects of a subject to leave behind, and which ones to bring along, takes time.

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Blackburn’s work interrogates and criticizes its own grounds. This sets it apart from that of many other poets. Here is a piece dated 1953:

Six weeks since I knew I loved her

It was Pentecost, and I told her she smelled like the host

We walked up 8th Avenue fifty blocks

and got a vermouth Cassis

I told her: ‘you know a hart is a young deer’

‘it certainly is’: she said

I showed her the Greek nite-club

where they dance

Six weeks

And now she goes out with a fellow named Green

Goes out Goes out

And I am alone, and have no children<sup>1</sup>

That’s by Howard Hart. Its similarity to Blackburn’s more self-pitying lines strikes one right away. But Blackburn’s engagement with a pedantic style of midcentury classicism caused him to develop in directions not apparent on the lexical surface of this or that poem; and the relationship with Pound won’t account for this tendency. Blackburn wears his Provence with a difference: he subjects the neoplatonic academicism of his formal education to a pragmatic Aristotelian scrutiny, and by doing so gradually forsakes it. Through the same process he overcomes his studious attitude toward both Pound and Williams. The driving figure through these turns is Louis Zukofsky.

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Unadorned, Blackburn’s writing affected his contemporaries’ impressions of his own person, in the flesh. From one of the more personal eulogies, Seymour Krim:

Blackburn was what you might call a classical man in a fucked-up period and not retreating from it. Even or especially his body was classical before it withered. Those clean features . . . plus the well-proportioned arms, legs, chest, all of it, but small-sized.<sup>2</sup>

His physical presence – which I can’t judge – aside, I take that epithet “classical” at its word. The poem “Paul” by Robert Creeley suggests there’s reason to do so; Blackburn, it reads, upon their first meeting

was

studying with Moses Hadas at NYU.<sup>3</sup>

A patient glance into that professor’s books reveals much about the poet’s grounding, if we assume Creeley is trustworthy in this case.

Throughout three volumes, Hadas refers over and over to a limited selection of quotations from the gamut of Greek writing and proposes that, taken together, they articulate the spirit of Athens during the classical period. With the utmost idealism, and with a minimal concern for historicity, Hadas sketches an anachronistic dream of Athens in the dim light of an expansive twentieth-century free-market USA. Supposedly the Greek city-state is an ancestor of the American nation-state. Hadas’ notions color Blackburn’s view, thickly:

It was adherence to their code of style which enabled the Greeks to survive the revolution of the Hellenistic Age and perpetuate Greek values in non-Greek lands. But a special code implies an elite . . . Why did not the

exclusiveness of the elite produce a caste system in Greece, as it did in India for example, with only a fortunate minority as bearers and beneficiaries of the code? How did a whole people come to share the outlooks we expect of an exclusive aristocracy?

Since men are equal in nature and rank is the product of convention, society may be fluid rather than static; since the social structure had been evolved by men and not imposed by divine authority, revolution involves no impiety, and since man is the measure of all things, assertion of self and pursuit of excellence is a desirable goal open to talent. These notions explain how exclusiveness might be broken, and aristocracy dislodged or supplanted, and its outlooks come to be shared by the generality.

Point for point the significant elements in this inventory of Athenian character may be derived from the Homeric outlook . . . . "To strive always for excellence and to surpass all others."

To Americans who are bred to the cult of success . . . this code does not seem very remarkable, except possibly in the starkness of its formulation. But we must remember that in large areas of human society, and in the same area at other times, ambitions of this kind cannot be taken for granted . . . . The key to that outlook, both among the Greeks and among the humanists, is the doctrine of man the measure.

[I]n the tradition of the fundamental doctrine of the ancients . . . an author's work must reflect his life: only a stark man could write epic, only a lover elegy, only a good man, in a word, could write good literature, for the writer can represent only such actions as he is himself capable of . . . . Throughout antiquity the doctrine that a poet's work must reflect his own character was accepted as axiomatic . . . . If only a lover can celebrate love and only a toper wine, then if we find praise of love or wine in a literary work, or praise of war or any similar trait, we may legitimately deduce that the author himself possessed such traits . . . . If a book involves the essence of the poet's character then his character, or at least so much of it as concerns us, may be disengaged out of his book.<sup>4</sup>

"Disengaged out of his book?" And: does the imperial classical Greeks' dependence upon foreign-born slave labor not indicate a caste system? And: isn't it true that excellence was a goal only partially open to women, whose citizenship was limited? (A writer who uses the word "man" to mean "humankind" might be expected to overlook this last question.) And yet, for all that, the coexistence here, of both an ethic of competition, and a style of sincerity, fascinates; this would remain a submerged preoccupation for the rest of Blackburn's life. Character, as in "character is fate," is a thing to be shaped for use in the act of writing.

What was it like, that "fucked-up period" this poet didn't retreat from? Gregory Corso, in a letter to Blackburn, Paris, May 20, 1958:

Thanks for your book, liked it very much, you is good poet, but somehow I don't feel any disorder in you, don't know, maybe it's good that way. I know I always get into a mess when I am not ordered, always saying too much of wrong silly things, and too little of right serious things . . . .<sup>5</sup>

The voice of an American bred to the cult of success – but one who has neither found a code of style, nor made up his own. Serious or silly, what's he got to adhere to? That's the modern mess. Blackburn's reply, November 30:

It seems to bug you that I set down 'real' experiences (some humanly complicated, some, aesthetic, some direct cathode to cathode either way, impulsive or repulsive) but in ordered form, strictly controlled. My own life is somewhat disorderly, and when not, is on the point of becoming so, almost always. I order my life in my work. When something is 'accomplished' within me, it can be set like a stone in a ring or a fly in amber, and it can and does 'come to me' that way . . . . sometimes talkily, sometimes stripped to its essences, but at the time of writing is ALREADY distant. And the poem finished, I am finished with it. I do not care, I cannot . . . . separate, minding its own business, at that point NO ONE could care less. That is the point at which *they* CAN begin to care. I am off, on to the next station, if poems can be thought of as stations, points in time. OKay?<sup>6</sup>

Paul Blackburn opposes modern American life and its poetry – half-disorderly, half-ordered, half-serious, half-silly – by exercising strict control over the work, and by relaxing control over the life. "I order my life in my work" sits unperturbed beside "I always get into a mess when I am not ordered." His later attraction to Aristotle was founded in his temperament and his training.

Through his subsequent development – specifically in the unpublished prose piece "Success" and in the relationship with Zukofsky – we read a student's reaction against a professor: Blackburn accepts a dream he was taught in school, then negotiates his way through the consequences of its anachronism. A critical reading shows that the poet doesn't think the Athenian code and the American cult signify the same ambition at all. Whatever in post-Homer post-Protagoras Athens equals late-capitalist mass-culture America, Blackburn discards. Meanwhile he preserves the hard flame of post-aristocratic ethics which Hadas had transmitted to him.

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*In . On . Or About The Premises* sorts out Williams' and Pound's places in Blackburn's world. Williams forms the backdrop, mechanized industry; Pound the figures moving to and fro across it, driven and passionate, despairing or intent. Williams' independence took as its metaphor the Whitmanic, earthy, Precisionist ambiguities of the Machine; Pound's was a Nietzschean, demonic, Decadent, moral ambiguity. Blackburn sees one in relief against the other. The optic fiction of Louis Zukofsky lets him do so.

Premises opens with a passage from Aristotle, the opening four sentences of the *Metaphysics*:

All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.<sup>7</sup>

("Men" here would seem to indicate "people.") Blackburn glosses:

As a matter of fact, I ran across the quote not in Aristotle, but in that big book of Louis', *Bottom: On Shakespeare*.<sup>8</sup>

Since the provenance of a quotation matters, a look into Zukofsky's biography will be instructive:

It was probably under Woodbridge that Zukofsky first made the acquaintance of . . . Aristotle.<sup>9</sup>

Now Frederick J.E. Woodbridge, Zukofsky's professor at Columbia, wrote from his own lecture notes a book called *Aristotle's Vision of Nature*, and in it he gives a view of that first sentence:

He begins the *Metaphysics* with a sentence "Παντες ανθρωποι του ειδεναι ορ εγονται φυσει." We translate "All men naturally have a desire of knowledge." But the του ειδεναι is a little baffling when we try to get its entire flavor into English. "Knowing" may do, if we can see that it is the bringing of one's knowing process to function that is desired, and that man is marked by something more than curiosity.

He takes language seriously, and he takes it as a natural or physical event. He sees in it well-nigh the most important event in the world. He is impressed by the human effort to get things properly said, and by the fact

that just in proportion as this is done, man finds himself in possession of an instrument by means of which he directs the forces at his command.

For things to go into language is . . . just as natural, as their going into air or water, up or down, or from seed to flower.

Aristotle was fond of words, but I believe he was fond of them because of a consciousness of their natural power, and because he believed that if there is any system of things, that system must be of a kind that permits the factors which make it a system, to get over into the language of men. The system must somehow be what it is said to be. If we are able to say what things are, then what they are must be something that can be said, and in getting said, they have reached, perhaps, the end of their career.<sup>10</sup>

So, in Woodbridge's book, the process of knowing (again for "men," i.e., "humans") is the moving of things from *their* system over into words and *their* system; and before what those things are can be said, it has to be apprehended by the senses, chiefly by the sense of sight. The important fact is that for this professor "to know" in the opening passage of the *Metaphysics* means "to speak" or "to write" and nothing else: that is, if something hasn't been said, written, then it isn't known – the knowledge is only in the saying, the writing. Such a blossoming of *things* into *words* sets the paragraph apart from certain theories of the senses, and associates it with certain others, and this is the source of Zukofsky's interest in the passage.

Epistemologically, in terms of getting something out in the air to be known among other people by speaking or writing, Woodbridge's idea seems tenable; but I think he runs into trouble by calling "language" a "physical event:" the implication that, among statements and tones in speech or writing, there exists some sort of system which behaves like the Newtonian one we normally posit as being active among objects and forces in the physical world, strikes me as tenuous at best, and at worst extremely dangerous.

Revising, I notice another disturbing possibility: that in composing his notes into a book, first published in 1965, Woodbridge may well have read Hugh Kenner's first study of Pound, which came out in 1951, and which contains the following nonsensical claims, never once endorsed by the poet:

Looking at the world, we know *things*. On a page of poetry there are set in motion the intelligible species of *things* . . . . The poet connects, arranges, defines, *things* . . . .

The Woodbridge sounds a lot like this. When we recall that Blackburn had expressed an early enthusiasm for the same passage in Kenner by underscoring it in his own copy, it starts to look as if here, where I thought I'd located a separate current of thought, I've actually only discovered yet another watered-down academic reading of *The Pisan Cantos*; and therefore it also starts to look as if Blackburn and Zukofsky's attempt to come to terms with the master only bound them more closely to him.

Whatever the case, Zukofsky's use in *Bottom* of the *Metaphysics* paragraph suggested Blackburn's in *Premises*. In *Bottom* Wittgenstein stands in for Williams, and Shakespeare for Pound; and both appear by comparison with the vision of nature in Aristotle:

Shakespeare and Wittgenstein from the words that are thought and expressed in their books appear to have read the similar thoughts of Aristotle.

Together, Wittgenstein and Shakespeare look back with longing almost two thousand years to 'simple' (single) nature.

Longing is *not* knowing; it is, 'simply' speaking, *not* surely seeing.

The unphilosophical eye shrinking to Wittgenstein's philosophical *I* of an extensionless point . . . . An extensionless *I* identifying itself with its modern world . . . .

*Looking* has its own logic, but . . . he who *looks* is still the philosophical *I*, the metaphysical subject, the limit—not a part of the world.

What is of interest in Shakespeare is the consistent longing for eyes in the words as they argue not to be divided from eyes.

But magnanimity is difficult for the divided poet [Zukofsky himself], who desires a single and simple pleasure like that of the eyes and is also the entalpic poet, philosopher, and philosopher of history, who attempts to order into universals its growing and decaying singulars. Then no words to him can ever literally look and be sure like the eyes.

Shakespeare's *Works* as they conceive history regret a great loss of physical looking. They recall with the abstracted 'look' of a late time. The intellectual propositions of their actions anticipate the present days' vanishing point, but unlike the present's propositions still sing an earthy underpinning.

It follows that Shakespeare's *Works* say: seeing should be the object of speech . . . rather than that speech . . . should be the object of seeing.<sup>11</sup>

I hope this long gloss on a few lines from Aristotle sets Blackburn's interest in context: the pursuit, by writing poems, of a vision of nature,

physical-philosophical, including the circumstance of its having been lost to us – the natural as artifice, a fraught concept. *Premises* recapitulates in practice *Bottom's* theory.

I can't write about the relationship between those books without noting an objection. Having read the *Metaphysics* as of this revision (October 2011), I think Aristotle was only interested in sense-perception so far as it served his turn for one half of an analogy; otherwise, he would have had to mention several other factors: for one thing, our habit from an early age of doubting our perceptions, and the complication and enrichment of experience that results from this. The paragraph doesn't measure up, and quoting it as if it represented a truth about the eye is a little like quoting the beginning of *Relativity* to show how trains and clocks and rulers really are in our life. It's simply not the way we see, obviously. No doubt any metaphysics will have to start from some sort of physics, but we ought to be on our guard against taking the proposal of such foundations as persuasive just because it's stated clearly, or because its tone is matter-of-fact.

With terms taken from ordinary experience, the beginning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is easy to read; but the concept of sense-perception it describes is actually so obscure that, while reading, one could easily pass over an ambiguity which comes, the more one thinks it through, to envelop those commonsensical phrases in shadow, and then to tower over them, until one's attention is distracted from the text by several rather important unstated considerations, as well as by this bizarre and troublesome disjunction itself.

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Blackburn was myopic; the poems are a fiction of clear-sightedness:

The truck has blocked :  
a young man with a portfolio from  
the art school next block, he  
walks very straight, proud, walked,  
disappeared behind truck where  
he can see, I can't,

two boys making a fire  
in a can in a  
vacant lot across the avenue.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle, in Latin translation, had a good deal to do with the development of scholastic logic, classification, and universities in later medi-

eval Europe; but from the seventeenth century onward his influence upon the arts, especially English poetry, has come by way of John Locke, in a current, at first narrow, later broad, called Empiricism, or the doctrine of the Association of Ideas. Perpetuating Aristotle's simpleminded notion on English soil, nothing, Locke says, is Intellect without first being Sense: "*Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuit in sensu.*" (This is translated from *De Anima*, or *On the Soul*.) The place of the senses in such an aesthetic is corrective; it runs counter, is reactive.

To the empiricist, knowledge comes wholly from sensation, or from reflection upon that sensation; insofar as we actually reason at all, therefore, "we reason," said Locke, "about particulars;" and for insight into the objectively general, empiricism substitutes the mere term "generalization," with its connotation of a subjective state of mind. In its opposition to the universal, and in its emphasis upon sensory and experiential proof, it is also essentially anti-rationalistic: it turns in distrust upon the generalizations which the "meddling intellect" is prone to make for the sake of convenience; in the reasoning process itself, as in other phenomena, it accepts that alone which constant and direct experience can verify; and, if carried far enough, its extreme results may become a skeptical relativism, and a final inability to rely upon much more than individual sentiment.

The aesthetic and critical reverberations of these tendencies become pronounced and then extend widely throughout western Europe by the latter half of the eighteenth century; and in doing so, they form the groundwork for the somewhat heterogeneous body of assumptions, inclinations and values which is called romanticism. For European romanticism, as it emerged historically, may perhaps be most generally defined as a turning away, in whatever direction, from the classical standard of ideal nature, and from the accompanying conviction that the full exercise of ethical reason may grasp that objective ideal. In more or less degree, it substitutes for these premises the beliefs that such truth as can be known is to be found primarily in or through the particular, and that this truth is to be realized, appreciated, and declared in art by the response to that particular of some faculty or capacity in humankind which is imaginative and emotional rather than "rational," and which therefore inclines to be individualistic and subjective in its working.<sup>13</sup>

I include this long bit of the official literary history because Zukofsky and Blackburn's concerns come along at our end of it; and their concerns were, as they themselves knew, backward, wistful, cranky. Blackburn and Zukofsky together look back longingly towards an initial schism which as far as I'm concerned never took place.

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*In . On . Or About the Premises* opposes the impact upon American poets of a return in French Symbolist poetry, as of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the Ideal. There remained in France the vestiges of an empirical mode, in Corbière, Laforgue, and Rimbaud. *Premises'* foe was the following current in modern writing:

I think that from Baudelaire I learned first, a precedent for the poetical possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis, of the possibility of fusion between the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric, the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic . . . that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractable unpoetic. That, in fact, the business of the poet was to make poetry out of the unexplored resources of the unpoetical; that the poet, in fact, was committed by his profession to turn the unpoetical into poetry.<sup>14</sup>

Here Intellect holds no speech with Sense, but enslaves it. Category forestalls perception. These "unexplored resources of the unpoetical" express, in fact, nothing from outside poetry (as if there were such a thing); rather they disclose the place of the Uncreated within the art – art's regard turned toward its materials and procedures, toward art: art's self-consciousness. In the passage quoted above, T.S. Eliot recalls his own early attraction to what he thinks is Baudelaire's malaise: the sense that by becoming self-conscious art becomes mere stark contrast, juxtaposition, a dualist affair.

In his interpretation of Baudelaire the American follows J.A. Symonds:

Symbolism in literature . . . is: a form of expression, at . . . best . . . approximate, essentially . . . arbitrary, . . . for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

The sensual, in Baudelaire, is torn loose from all other experience:

Like thinning echoes tumbling to sleep beyond  
In a unity umbrageous and infinite,  
Vast as the night stupendously moonlit,  
All smells and colors and sounds correspond.<sup>16</sup>

Isolated, sense-experience is consistent with itself, so can *stand for* the insensible, also self-consistent. Touch and taste, as most bodily, aren't mentioned; and smell is highest of the senses, as least bodily. This is Baudelaire's theory of the senses.

If sense-data are walled off from all else, it's a short step to declare that words themselves always exist in such a closed space too. Stéphane Mallarmé, following Baudelaire, abstracts such an ideal – the Word, isolated from the Sensual:

What is the use of the wonder of transposing a fact of nature in its quivering near-disappearance according to the game of speech, however, if not to distil from it, without the embarrassment of a close and concrete recall, the pure notion.<sup>17</sup>

Notice how close this gets to Woodbridge's Aristotle – “transposing a fact of nature,” “For things to go into language is . . . natural” – and how it then turns its back: “the game of speech.” Unlike Baudelaire, and unlike Woodbridge's Aristotle, but like certain other Greek writers, notably Isocrates, Mallarmé takes care here to insist upon a particular difference between human beings and the rest of nature: only we play a game when we speak, only we, in other words, are eloquent. And what constitutes such eloquence? “I say,” writes Mallarmé, “a flower!”

and, out of the oblivion to which my voice consigns any outline, being something other than known petal-cups, musically rises an actual and sweet idea, the one absent from all bouquets.<sup>18</sup>

For Mallarmé, we are eloquent in writing or speaking when our voice, as if it acted like music, obliterates a memory of something visible and puts an idea where that memory had been. (In this sense any idea whatever, actual and sweet or no, will be absent from all bouquets, call it a flower, or a necktie – but let that pass.) C.M. Bowra glosses the above passage:

The flower evoked by the magic word is the ideal flower, which has in it the beauty of all flowers and is not one among them but something above them. Readers of Plato will see a resemblance between this “*idée*” and the Platonic εἶδος, or Form, which is both a universal principle and an ideal particular.<sup>19</sup>

“The magic word” – a rumor of hocus-pocus does seem to crowd around the so-called Symbolists. This Platonic cult of Beauty (ideal

beauty, of course) issued, says the critic, from a crisis: “in speaking intimately, solemnly, as only religion had, poetry becomes a religion, with all duties and responsibilities of sacred ritual.”<sup>20</sup>

The greatest poets, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, have both informed and created, have been both teachers and magicians. They were fortunate in their times which expected a poet to be a repository of wisdom and to have a special insight into life. The modern poet is less lucky. Much of his inherited task has been taken from him by science. The astronomer, the geographer, the psychologist are thought to know more about their subjects than ever he can. Even in ethics he must compete with the priest, the moral philosopher and the journalist. He is not expected and not allowed to claim his old rights. He must be simply a poet, and what that means the public does not know nor very much care . . .

The magical view of poetry gives a special place to the poet. He is once again the “*Vates*,” the instrument of unseen powers who works by superhuman methods . . . . In consequence he is free, as he has seldom been, to be himself . . . .<sup>21</sup>

I'd say, to the contrary, that poetry, as a body of work, of knowledge, of ways of grasping life, complete unto itself, and passed along over centuries, is one among many such bodies, and only because of that is superior to all the rest of them; and if the status of poets, as poets, appears to have diminished *vis-à-vis* all of society, then nothing whatsoever is gained by becoming free to be oneself, by laying enchantments, if that's all we understand ourselves to be doing, our chief business, our distinctive function. In declining to be only a *vates*, an instrument of unseen powers, it seems to me Paul Blackburn, for one, is an example of the kind of poet that refuses to accept this drastically shrunken conception of poetry's place in the cosmos, no less than in “the” world – not out of false modesty either, but a recognition of the highest possibilities of the art.

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The radical – and dubious – turn to Aristotle in *Premises* leaves to the line as the poet writes it, and not to forethought, the correction of Empiricism by the Ideal: leaves all the Ideal out, to be supplied, in other words, by the reader.

Coleridge phrased that correction thus:

How can we make bricks without straw? Or build without cement? We learn all things indeed by *occasion* of experience; but the very facts so learnt

force us inward on the antecedents, that must be pre-supposed in order to render experience itself possible . . . .

The term, Philosophy, defines itself as an affectionate seeking after the truth; but Truth is the correlative of Being. This again is no way conceivable, but by assuming as a postulate, that both are ab initio, identical and co-inherent; that intelligence and being are reciprocally each other's substrate.<sup>22</sup>

Here I find an account that starts to satisfy my sense of the complexity of sense-perception: an oscillation does seem to occur, and we can't slow it down, or even refute it, by merely kicking against the stones. Julio Cortázar, showing some feeling for the connection between will and sensation, moralizes:

I think I know how to look, if it's something I know, and also that every looking oozes with mendacity, because it's that which expels us furthest outside ourselves, without the least guarantee, whereas to smell or . . . . In any case, if the likely inaccuracy can be seen beforehand, it becomes possible again to look; perhaps it suffices to choose between looking and the reality looked at, to strip things of all their unnecessary clothing. And surely all that is difficult besides.<sup>23</sup>

These two writers, with their several acknowledgments, in their care to state the case, are what you might call honest.

The part the eye plays, then, is what's at issue.

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How images reach us by way of light is well known. An object reflects a pattern of light onto the eye. The light enters the eye through the pupil, is gathered by the lens, and thrown against the back of the eye, the retina. On the retina is a network of nerve fibers which pass the light through a system of cells to several million receptors, the cones. The cones are sensitive both to light and to colour, and they respond by carrying information about light and colour to the brain.

*Eyesight* is optical; *to see* is something else. For the difference between the two, first, Guy Davenport:

In 1960 a technician in the Bell Telephone Laboratories discovered that he could make an image appear in a stereopticon that is neither of the two images which the stereopticon is fusing. The example I have seen is of a spatter of dots, seemingly random, in squares side by side. Through

the stereopticon one sees a sharp-edged isosceles triangle beautifully defined, suspended just above the spatter of dots. It is partly in the left-hand square, partly in the right.<sup>24</sup>

A stereopticon plays, for its effect, upon the physical makeup common to all people. So far optics. Where seeing begins from here, we may learn from Michael Baxandall:

It is at this point that human equipment for visual perception ceases to be uniform, from one person to the next. The brain must interpret the raw data about light and colour that it receives from the cones and it does this with innate skills and those developed out of experience . . . . But each of us has had different experience, and so each of us has slightly different knowledge and skills of interpretation. Everyone, in fact, processes the data from the eye with different equipment. In practice these differences are quite small, since most experience is common to us: we all recognize our own species, judge distance and elevation, infer and assess movement, and many other things. Yet in some circumstances the otherwise marginal differences between one person and another can take on a curious prominence.<sup>25</sup>

Those otherwise marginal differences comprise the realm of the imagination, and the visual arts, where to look at a work requires an effort quite separate from that required by routine eye-activity.

Looking at a picture which appeals to the optical aspect of our visual experience – that is, the physical aspect – we notice that yes, the painter has shown how the eye behaves in certain ways under certain conditions: emerging from deep shadow into the sudden glare of direct sunlight, we do seem to see chartreuse tints and mauve shades in the contours of pale skin, for instance. But a picture might address visual experiences beyond the common physical equipment instead: wherein a heightened state of vigilance allows us to feel emotions and make decisions, when we see *through* not *with* the eye, able to discern a person or group's inward life, according to visible behavior conscious or not. And of course many paintings depict such persons or groups of people, and reveal such a state.

Life can't see life that way, most often. And yet, failing to hold out for a heightened state, Blackburn instead makes the perversity of optics-as-an-aesthetic a big part of the subject matter of *Premises*. It's what can't be dealt with, yet is, all the time: that which is right under one's nose, inscrutable. The poet's treatment is anything but gracious; it's the opposite, for example, of this painter's rapt appraisal of his own surroundings:

the visual toughness of lower Manhattan surfaces and colors, the sense of fragmentation of things, of seeing only parts of buildings, trucks, sky, signs – the random nature of what you saw.

One of the things that used to fascinate me was those architectural sections between the buildings, sections of air that would grow . . . . And I used to see those and . . . think about a painting that would be atmospheric and architectural.<sup>26</sup>

Environment's no inspiration. Still less is Blackburn's city the isolate fantasy of flâneur Nick Carraway:

I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye.<sup>27</sup>

For the poet, a Symbolist dualist idealism lurks just out of sight behind such views.

Rather, in this book of poems, an abstraction, from both the inner and the outer, has happened before ever the city gets represented. Here is why, I think:

In this "horrible inside-outside" of unuttered words and unfulfilled intentions . . . . The center of "being-there" wavers and trembles. Intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void. We are banished from the realm of possibility.

In this drama of intimate geometry, where should one live? . . . .

Let us observe that this nightmare is not visually frightening. The fear does not come from the outside. Nor is it composed of old memories. It has no past, no physiology. Nothing in common, either, with having one's breath taken away. Here fear is Being itself. Where can one flee, where find refuge? Space is nothing but a "horrible outside-inside."<sup>28</sup>

Though one recognizes all this anguish, thankfully the poetry just turns its back on it, and instead catches a glimpse, a reflection off that insensate historical *process* which has brought about the above conditions. Mircea Eliade:

When possession is taken of a territory – that is, when its exploitation begins – rites are performed that symbolically repeat the act of Creation: the uncultivated zone is first "cosmicized," then inhabited.

A territorial conquest does not become real until after the ritual of taking possession, which copies the Creation of the World.

Every territory occupied for the purpose of *Lebensraum* is first transformed from chaos into cosmos; through the effect of ritual it is given a form which makes it real.<sup>29</sup>

Some such abstraction as this sad story, and not the *soi-disant* visible world, offers us our vantage.

Henceforth, foreign observers reflecting on their travels to New York City best contextualize Blackburn. Camus:

Manhattan. Sometimes from beyond the skyscrapers, across the hundreds of thousands of high walls, the cry of a tugboat finds you in your insomnia in the middle of the night, and you remember that this desert of iron and cement is an island.<sup>30</sup>

Sartre, more darkly:

This checkerboard is New York. The streets look so much alike that they have not been named. They have merely been given registration numbers, like soldiers.

But if you look up, everything changes. Seen in its height, New York is the triumph of individualism. The tops of the buildings defy all the rules of town planning. They have twenty-seven, fifty-five and a hundred storeys. They are grey, brown, or white, Moorish, medieval, renaissance or modern. On Lower Broadway, they press against each other, dwarfing the tiny black churches, and then, suddenly, they separate, leaving between them a gaping hole of light. Seen from Brooklyn they seem to have the nobility and solitude of bouquets of palm trees on the banks of rivers in Moroccan Susa – bouquets of skyscrapers which the eye is always trying to assemble and which are always coming undone . . . .

There are individuals in America, just as there are skyscrapers. There are Ford and Rockefeller, and Hemingway and Roosevelt. They are models and examples.

The buildings are, in this sense, votive offerings to success. Behind the Statue of Liberty, they are like the statues of a man or an undertaking which has risen above the rest. They are immense publicity ventures, constructed in large part to demonstrate the financial triumph of individuals or groups . . . . They simply demonstrate that, in the United States, individuality is something to be won. That is probably the reason why New York seemed so passionately attached to a liberal economy.

Yet everyone knows the power of trusts in the United States, a power which represents another form of controlled economy. But the New Yorker has not forgotten the period when a man could win a fortune by his personal initiative. What he dislikes about the controlled economy is the red tape. Thus, paradoxically enough, the same man who so obediently submits to guidance in public and private life is intransigent where his job

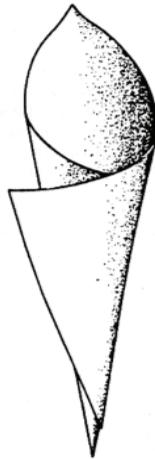
is concerned. The reason is that this is the area of his independence, his initiative and his personal dignity . . . .

In any event, it is not based on our kind of individualism, but on conformism.<sup>31</sup>

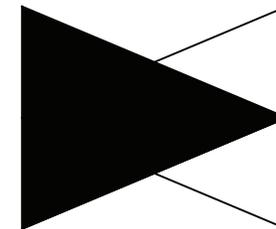
On the street, amid such conformist structures, there occurs a distortion of sense-perception; space warps on the eye, in John Berger's account, for one, and

if you picture the experienced space of other cities as being sheets of paper laid out more or less flat on their sides, here the sheet of paper has been twisted into a paper-funnel bag . . . . The funnel-bag is made of graph paper. It is filled with faces, languages, cars, bottles, trees, fabrics, machines, plans, stairs, hands, threats, promises . . . .<sup>32</sup>

The critic renders his "funnel" almost as a cala lily:



Now, coming upon this symbol, one recalls right away quite another description, another drawing, this one in *A Vision* by W.B. Yeats:



Yeats' description:

I see the gyre of "Concord" diminishes as that of "Discord" increases, and can imagine then the gyre of "Concord" increasing while that of "Discord" diminishes, and so on, one gyre within the other always.<sup>33</sup>

The question isn't whether or not we inhabit an age of critique, or whether a spurious legitimacy gets doled out arbitrarily by poetry pundits (answer: of course we do, and of course it does); but rather: What are we going to found our own judgments on? I'm aware that these last few quotations aren't condoned anywhere within Blackburn's writing; they represent an attempt to dissociate my reading from the conditions under which I believe Blackburn composed his poetry. When I think about Paul Blackburn, these quotes matter to me.

Here then we have schematized, first, the feel of a place, as humans have made it; and second, the fluxions of strife within human consciousness.

\* \* \*

With these schemes before us, we find at last some context against which to read a poem of Blackburn's: cosmic Manhattan, gyroform red-tape-funnel island.

THE SLOGAN

Over the right  
 triangle formed  
 by Stuyvesant St. & Ninth, the  
 wellknit blonde in a blue knit dress & the hair piled high

crosses on the hypotenuse, jiggles

t  
 w  
 o  
 w  
 o  
 r  
 l  
 d  
 s

& several hemispheres as she walks .

The trajectory

causes a mass cessation of work  
 at a Con Edison encampment on  
 one of the other two sides, all  
 orange equipment with dark red flashers, flags  
 at the corners of the encampment wave cheerfully  
 in the Monday morning breeze, all the orange helmets  
 facing the same way, eyes right, and clearly

everything else is right

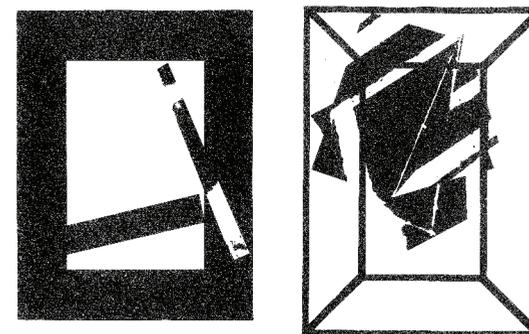
Click  
 click  
 the heels go at an easy pace across Stuyvesant  
 touch the curb at Ninth, jiggle-jiggle . The  
 explanation  
 is printed on the sides of all the equipment, even on one flag :  
 DIG WE MUST  
 They dig .<sup>34</sup>

For a gloss on the poem, this remark, from an interview:

*Does geometry enter into this? You've got a poem about a girl walking along a "hypotenuse" to cross a square.*

That's working the city, where things are not necessarily grid. It just so happens I like squares and there are fewer of them in American cities than in Europe. America on the whole is less graceful; our constructs are much too often ugly.<sup>35</sup>

Surely "constructs" embraces more than the concrete. Pictures by Michelle Stuart appear between groups of poems in *Premises*:



Abstracted shards or ash heaps crisscross framelike rectangles. On the scale of robotic surveyor photography, the cement triangle which "The Slogan" transforms into an emblem of human conduct comes across as the most pedestrian of a cityscape's features:



What the poem has to do with our ugly constructs is this. First: the scene is not observed in plain air but imagined; the workmen's encampment is "on / one of the other two sides," no matter which. Second: not the woman ("girl"), but the *trajectory* causes work to cease. We, the poet, stand at the third side, looking on. Albers:

The rarity of lines in nature points out a fundamental difference between art and the natural world. For art is between geometry and the organic.<sup>36</sup>

I don't think art itself is "between" or even among anything, but instead quite apart; and yet here the reader perceives a contrast – in this poem the helmets and eyes, and the blonde, play out a drama, in the stunted manner of droid and cyborg, because of their circumstance; and this drama becomes visible from a standpoint which only art may reveal, as if the reader were watching directly from their midst. The cessation of work remains an expression of desire, albeit mutilated. This bit of geometry crops up as a figure in negative, the force pressed by Enlightenment progress-competition-ideology against the lives, the bodies, of men and women.

The poem seems cut from whole cloth. Its diction sets up an atmosphere not of nuance, made with formal art, but of double entendre, born from chance; and as such it doesn't interpose between its subject matter and its sensibility a distance that would be sufficient to make room for contemplation. Here as elsewhere in Blackburn's writing a lack of subtlety risks being mistaken for an endorsement of crude reality, even in the generous reader's mind. To be plain, the poem courts accusations of liberal-baiting at best, at worst accusations of a masculinist or lightly misogynist sort of conformity – which (besides being a little annoying) wouldn't matter, if not for the fact that the distance between matter and means is so small: it's hard to tell whether the poet is as bored as I think he ought to be. Once you seek an image of men and women interacting in spite of mass circumstance, this poem won't satisfy.

\* \* \*

What is the nature, then, of that figure-in-negative, the right triangle?

The axioms of a geometry are not complete unless that geometry is the exact representation of a group; until one has found the group that is the rational basis of a geometry, the latter is incomplete and possibly self-contradictory. In other words, the group furnishes proof that the mathematical object in question is "closed" . . . .<sup>37</sup>

What group might this right triangle of "The Slogan" represent?

The situation is interesting, and it is well known: *two irreducibly different entities are reduced to similarity through an exterior point of view . . . .* What is the Pythagorean theorem? It is the fundamental theorem of measurement in the space of *similarities* . . . . And the space of similarities is that space where things can be of the same form and *another* size. It is the space of models and of imitations. The theorem of Pythagoras founds measurement on the representative space of imitation . . . .

It is a rigorous proof, and the first in history, based on *mimesis*. It says something very simple: *supposing mimesis, mimesis is reducible to the absurd*. Thus the crisis of irrational numbers overturns Pythagorean arithmetic and early Platonism . . . .

It is not reason that governs, it is the obstacle . . . .

Translation: *mimesis* is reducible to self-contradiction or to the undecidable. Yet it exists; we cannot do anything about it. It works, as they say. That's the way it is. *Therefore*, all of the theory which precedes must be transformed. What becomes absurd is not what we have proven to be absurd, but the theory as a whole on which the proof depends.<sup>38</sup>

The group, the experience, that renders absurd, and then transforms, the theory which makes itself possible, is Sensuality – impossible to avoid, and all the more perilously ignored when we meet with the constricted pantomime of its suppressed states.

In "The Slogan," even Sensuality's half-mechanized shape, forced onto a trajectory, trips up all production, all "work." And the vision of that, this looking, this seeing, is altogether separate from any aesthetic of optics; just as it's separate from Symbolist mysticism, a neo-Platonic Ideal of forms: the poem has its eye on both Symbolism and Empiricism at once. Nothing is known till it's seen. Sensuality in these poems is the experience of writing. Only to write is to see.

\* \* \*

Otherwise there's just the contemplation of environment left us, spectatorship. The people described in *Premises* mark the poet's development from his earlier work, as he learns to show different interactions between persons, and between groups of people and a shared circumstance. The Sublime comes in for driest treatment of all.

This new form, the geometrical sublime, had to do with triumphs over nature more emphatic than those of the antebellum period. Whereas the dynamic form of the technological sublime had emphasized the movement of information over wires and railways across the natural landscape, trans-

forming it into a mere backdrop, the geometrical sublime was static and appeared to dominate nature through elegant design and sheer bulk. It found expression first in bridges and afterward in skyscrapers. All these structures expressed the triumph of reason in concrete form, proving that the world was becoming, in Emerson's words, "a realized will" – the double of man.<sup>39</sup>

(It would be something else again to speculate how far that triumphant world is a double of Woman.) The optical and the symbolic are both forms of sublimity. "The sublime is, after all, essentially an aesthetic"<sup>40</sup> and *Premises* gives it slight regard.

\* \* \*

Some, stubborn, see themselves as backed up against, and dwarfed by, all that American gigantism:

The glasses' bottoms thunk down hard  
 this late hour before closing  
 and some indignant horse, an  
 aroused horse  
 clambers to its feet

about to become an automobile<sup>41</sup>

The manners of men are finely rendered, drily, warmly, with finesse:

The old newspaperman always takes his hat off  
 & lays it atop the cigarette machine;  
 the younger, so-hip journalist, leaves his on  
 old-style .

The old man sits down in the corner, puts  
 his hat back on. No challenge, but  
 it's visible, the beau geste .  
 The cigarette  
 hangs from the side of the younger man's mouth, he's  
 putting himself on .<sup>42</sup>

Notice how, between these strophes, a change in mood appears, from "always takes his hat off" to "sits down," from the rote to a passing moment, while still within the simple present tense.

There is time here to salute hauteur and delicacy where you find them. Women's manners one to another are depicted in *Premises* as

nowhere else in Blackburn's work:

"What is it called?"  
 "Sugar buns," says Aunt Ella  
 looking at the buns themselves  
 as tho she were identifying some obscure layer  
 of geological time for a  
 micro-paleontologist who might know better, that her  
 expression not insult the girl.<sup>43</sup>

Such poetry is of course no record, but a selection from and a fictionalized ordering of what happened, so that it becomes what might happen. Given their backdrop, these scenes are a *tendresse*.

\* \* \*

To fill out the relationship with Zukofsky: the older poet wrote, in a fellowship recommendation – seeing something of his own interests in Blackburn's – that

I can sum up his worth very quickly – his writing is as important as his personal character is lovely: an American city man whose singular sensitivity always goes out to the things and people around him – but who is equally aware in the country and in foreign countries – so that he records the life of his time which alone makes a native literature.<sup>44</sup>

An uncollected prose statement of Blackburn's regarding Celia and Louis' *Catullus*:

NOTE : The purpose of these versions of Catullus is to sound like Latin and make English; to make English sound like Latin, to make Latin sounds. So that the reader can hear how. Latin sounds. Do not facilitate the English sense; attention is required. Zukofsky does for Catullus what Pound did for Arnaut Daniel. Having Latin would help the reader. Lacking that, so would a more traditional English version; so would a trot; or maybe not. A complete Catullus is being prepared for the dear reader by the Zukofsky family.<sup>45</sup>

These reciprocal prose estimations usher us into a quiet colloquy between the two men's poems.

The lines don't sneer but press home their clear oblique jibes. In "The Immediate Aim," part 1, Zukofsky scowls:

your value which enslaves you  
in advance

has made your eye-pupils limited—

inanity  
to prate  
the injustice of it.<sup>46</sup>

At which, in “Currency Events,” Blackburn slurs:

what certain ignorant  
individuals of different classes

define as *reality*.  
You ass, it’s the idea

of value, has  
conned you before  
hand .<sup>47</sup>

(In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Bottom is changed into an ass.) Value is an idea; some would convince others that it’s part of a human being.

Another Blackburn poem replies, first, once again to “The Immediate Aim,” this time its third part:

each animal  
his own gravedigger  
almost  
sings

who will  
walk out  
against  
the

social  
and political  
order of  
things<sup>48</sup>

and second, to “No One Inn:”

who owns it being in a war  
plays the market early  
hires a chef would look at his chef’s hat<sup>49</sup>

Here is Blackburn:

#### MOTIVATIONS I.

*each animal  
his own gravedigger  
—L.Z.  
Crow. Crow. Where  
leave you  
my other boys?  
—L.J.*

He gets a job as a waiter because

He wd/ like to look at a chef’s hat  
what he misses in the street

the street<sup>50</sup>

People’s ends are of their own making, so any object that a person sees is going to take its meaning from the reason why he or she looks – the hat on a chef’s head, for instance.

Part 13 of Zukofsky’s “Light” concludes:

Four hours sleep would be plenty  
If today were enough to get up for  
and make coffee.<sup>51</sup>

Which, with “Good Morning, Love!,” the younger man chides:

Nothing can alter the euphoria  
The blister is still on one finger  
There just are  
some mornings worth getting up  
& making a cup  
of coffee,  
that’s all<sup>52</sup>

This morning it's worth it, simply because some mornings it is: as if to correct the older man's presumptuous judgment of what the day's going to be like before he's even gotten out of bed and looked around.

The second part of Blackburn's poem "Three-part Invention" compares written letters of the alphabet – graphic signs of actions and sounds – with human bodies, incarnations. The lines equate creative writing with sex:

The first quarter-hour of solstice  
ends with your hand in the small of my back, a gentle  
    stroking  
that brings everything from me, colors  
and the dark spring from me into the dark / breaths  
move from the shallows to deeps after-  
ribcages rise and fall together.  
    Aware finally of movement of air  
    cooling the damp limbs, two making V  
four an inverted M : and then, both  
flopping on our faces, all those  
lower-case l's .<sup>53</sup>

In "A"-7 Zukofsky had used the capital letters A and M to describe the shape of sawhorses standing at either end of a city block:

For they have no eyes, for their legs are wood,  
For their stomachs are logs with print on them;  
Blood red, red lamps hang from necks or where could  
Be necks, two legs stand A, four together M.<sup>53</sup>

The Blackburn poem morphs these shapes from an animal-like simple machine to the human animal.

More cordially, we have part 8 of "The Old Poet Moves to a New Apartment 14 Times," in which Sara, then Blackburn's wife, is sketched:

Tiny sarah golden  
so taken in  
  
by the beauties  
of the suites  
wondrously  
  
assumed  
her friends' new

apartment

had fabulously  
called in  
an interior decorator.

*She* did not presume *they*  
knew nothing of decor

tho her loves  
could they tell her so  
had never aspired  
to a decorator.<sup>55</sup>

The withering warmth of this is matched by a chatty New York, old-world, inscribed "(for L.Z.)" in "A Dull Poem:"

Does this generation know  
about mickies, set among coals, wood  
fires in vacant lots, cooked to half-  
raw & eaten with stolen salt / charred skins and all?  
Even in those islands of still-poor Irish, their  
isolated blocks about the city? No micks here  
no cherries there, bean sprouts with rice &  
*comidas criollas* composed of the obscure parts of dead pigs.  
The bakery's German & serves  
healthy, bland, Mitteleuropa  
meals for about a buck. Tender  
    loin tomorrow,  
    goulash today.  
I bring my own wine.<sup>56</sup>

Another, "Affinities III," registers a moment of largesse upon Blackburn's leaving the Zukofskys' apartment; that moment's passage; and the poet's commitment, then, to the enlarged purview the visit had granted him:

AFFINITIES III.

Walking out of Louis Zukofsky's new place  
Columbia Heights  
at 1:35 in the morning  
there's the smell of sea  
the sound of boats / that turn in the bay  
    into river and up

crossing, the engines over the night, the  
night over the bridge, the bridge  
over the river and

up  
2 blocks  
the smell of all that goes  
into memory of itself until, by Hicks St. the only  
real thing is the odor of already-walked dogs and one's own  
sweat in the summer night.

How keep this thief from home  
and the guard down  
for a moment?

to turn back, to  
make harbor at that,  
that moment of crossing.<sup>57</sup>

In its second verse-paragraph, the poem staggers, so to speak; then resolves in the concluding two to retain its initial surety. The apartment becomes a fixed set of coordinates inspiring self-assurance.

The smells of freedom there are paired with, in "Two Flowers," sounds – those of Paul Zukofsky:

Later . in Brooklyn:  
a violinist and poet's son  
listening to his last concert  
played on my tape machine  
elbows on desk, head  
sunk between his hands, joined,  
fingers a very fast section of the Bach in  
recapitulation on his other hand as  
his mind moves

All our nerves contain is that dry heat  
Those flood gates open wide, split  
and bloat . that sound . fill  
up, over  
flow<sup>58</sup>

No missing the affection there, nor the observation.

These two are kin in the art. Their relationship resembles that which the younger poet had developed with Pound; but now the student has worked out a few things for himself, and the teacher serves

more concentrated purposes. The post-Spinozist, post-deist, post-transcendentalist interpretation of Aristotle which Zukofsky suggests in his prose has sharpened Blackburn's desire to put a little distance between himself and both Pound and Williams; and the pieces relating to his fellow New Yorker plot points of companionable disagreement between PB and LZ, who lived in a city which remained at once the financial eastern capitol of the United States and the westernmost metropolis of Europe.

\* \* \*

Those who write live in that activity the experience of sensuality as they never do in the acts of sense-perception themselves. In Blackburn's poems, writing is the experience that's meant by the evocation of sensate particulars, because of the tendency, shared by both writing and sense-perception, to correct ideation, not either to supplant or stand for it. Reading this way, while also recognizing certain limitations (notably a reductive streamlining of the perception-process) you find here no presumption of spiritual privilege, nor Reason as such: but instead an urgent inquiry as to the place of the sensuous in our life, the delight.

\* \* \*

In the course of sending poems and letters back and forth with Nicholas James Whittington, I received an essay from him which touched on the above, so I sent him this chapter. Exchanging letters around written works is very different from following along with a miscellany of images judiciously displayed and tagged. A letter is not a personal message tacked up on the public board; letters hazard something. Nick's response, in part:

Greatly appreciate the chapter's sort of tropological form, which yet harks back repeatedly to its own earlier metaphoric terms. What I like best, what I think the highest compliment I can pay, is that it so lubricates my own thought.

I see the generic flower, not above, but circumscribed around all flowers, so not absent all bouquets, but inherent in each & every one. Each of us upon reading "flower" does not picture some universal, but some particular & each of us a different particular. I picture daffodil, my mother's favorite flower, you picture, what?



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