

MARY BURGER

Interviewed by Jacques Debrot

First published in README, Issue 1, Fall 1999 (<http://home.jps.net/~nada/burger.htm>)

People convinced of their own beauty are easier to be around.
Really convinced.
So they don't need to prove it.

.....

"I'm just bored" doesn't elicit sympathy. But if you drink to fix it,
watch them call you weak.
Not whining. The resolution between bored drunk and bored to death.

.....

Everyone is shocked. Everyone is horrified. Everyone is angry.
Everyone is grateful for their life. Or, everyone is sad at senseless tragedy.

That is, that American history is different from anyone else's.

.....

Serial optimist.

I don't believe people get power by being evil.

— from *Bleeding Optimist* (Xurban Press, 1995)

Jacques Debrot: The first thing that's immediately obvious about almost all your work is its striking visual presentation. In *Bleeding Optimist*, for instance, you juxtapose each page of text with an illustration of a uterus superimposed on a bridge score sheet. And, of course, your magazine, *Proliferation*, was also unusually innovative in its graphic design.

Mary Burger: The emphasis on graphic design comes from my interest in text as a visual medium, one from print to electronic media, with imagery and animation becoming as common as text in conveying information, and reading habits changing or completely disappearing, it's also true that graphic design and publishing resources are becoming a lot more accessible. It was that nexus of factors that influenced our choices in *Proliferation*, in wanting to create a journal that paid a lot of attention to the physical presentation of the work, and to the means of production used in creating the book object.

JD: *Bleeding Optimist* isn't the only work of yours in which you appropriate illustrations from Gray's *Anatomy*, is it?

MB: I've done several things — an artist's book completed at Naropa titled *False Pelvis True Pelvis* (combining poems loosely structured around seduction and fantasy, with graphics ranging from anatomy to pornography), a work called *Coughing Fit*, excerpted in *Chain Three/2*, (collaging texts from some of my medical records with corresponding etchings and text from Gray's).

JD: An important aspect of your own craft in both *Coughing Fit* and *Bleeding Optimist*, is your use of repetitive and serial structures. In *Coughing Fit*, you could almost say that there is a strange — perhaps even sedimented — relationship between this and the condition for which you were being

treated — recurrent Hodgkins disease. It's interesting to see how several phrases — the most neutral ones, I noticed — recur in this work. It's also a circular piece — at least the excerpt in Chain is — beginning and ending with the sentence, "This is a note."

MB: In Coughing Fit, the repetition — and other structural devices — were intended to address the uncanny condition of observing one's self, or an aspect of one's self, as an outsider. The language of the medical records was dispassionate, often nearly unintelligible, and inherently repetitive, as the doctor/reporter restated certain factors with each examination. I found that impersonal tone to be an intriguing vantage point from which to address the very intimate, emotional issues of a health crisis. My intent was to inhabit and exaggerate the most detached, imperious aspects of that language, to sort of explode the premise of the subject inhabiting the body in any sovereign or proprietary way. The contradiction inherent to medicine — that one's body, one's being, both is and is not one's own — became a trope for the writing.

JD: The uterine image in Bleeding Optimist is much more charged than the detached and neutral language you describe here, but at the same time it's the image's unvarying repetition on every other page that, for me at least, begins to signify just as much as — or even more than — the image itself, as if it were some stubborn, irreducible fact.

MB: The image occurred to me as a suitable one for Bleeding Optimist, where much of the text refers to a woman in an antagonized sexual relationship with a man, and makes some kind of link between that relationship and the O.J. Simpson trial, the Oklahoma bombing, and other more local, less celebrated crimes. I wanted to connote — without spelling things out too much — a sense of embattled female identity, but also the sense in which sexuality often stands in for a larger sense of female identity — how femaleness is reduced to sexuality; also the sense of a (female) self being implicated in a larger scenario, and the way in which that scenario might not recognize the female as agent: the battle between "we" and "they" might not really involve the female/bearer of the uterus as an actor, but may just use her as a site. Through that image, and the cover photo (of a woman holding a gun to her own head, as if in a standoff — which in fact she was) I wanted to elaborate on or augment the sense of arrested agency that I was working with in the text; the simultaneous obligation and impossibility of really shaping one's own circumstances.

JD: It is characteristic of your poetry, too, that you attempt to work all of this out in narrative terms — that you are, in a sense, committed to that form, to a certain kind of narrativity.

MB: Narrative is seductive in its transparency, though it's a seductiveness that I doubt as much as I succumb to it. My interest in narrative seems to arise from a need to deal with the notion of time, the passage of time. And narrative, things taking place in time, seems to follow inevitably from that. But what constitutes a narrative, and, even more, how to write a narrative, are very vexed questions. Narrative convention often trusts that you will suspend your disbelief and accept the narrative's premises. But I'm uncomfortable with that suspension, and far more interested in revealing the premises, exposing the structures that hold the illusion together. I'm interested in when those structures simply don't hold together, when you have to say, finally, this isn't a narrative — I'm interested in that point of collapse, in sustaining that throughout a piece, as a means of investigating just what is or isn't enough to sustain the "window on reality" illusion of narrative.

JD: But why use narrative at all, fractured or otherwise?

MB: I find narrative a singularly useful vehicle for addressing issues of time, space, and social interaction — all recurrent motifs of the human condition, all things I want to write about.

JD: One of the most compelling contemporary accounts of narrativity — an account which is not irrelevant, I think, to the central themes of Bleeding Optimist — is Rene Girard's. To oversimplify, somewhat, Girard describes narrative's sexual politics as being structured by a male-male-female erotic triangle in which women (as passive actors) are dominated by the power relationships between men (the active points of the triangle). In Bleeding Optimist, how specifically do you attempt to

renegotiate the representation of female identity in narrative?

MB: In one way I was attempting to interrogate an abject condition to see what else could be wrung from it — to take the passive spectatorship or receptivity or objectified status often ascribed to the female, and explore it from the subject's point of view. I wanted to find moments in which helplessness dissolves to reveal agency, in which a state of exploitation or humiliation is inextricably tied up with the exercise of choice or will.

The narrator is largely a spectator — of her lover, particularly his involvement with risk and crime, of the media/entertainment industry's obsession with violent crime, of tangible, local violence and crime, and of her own sexual experience — by association perhaps also a kind of crime. Her spectatorship and her reporting implicates her own fascination with and willing participation in each of these things. I think the question is left open as to how much control one has over the choice of one's fascinations — whether a love object or a media obsession — but I wanted to locate the places where passivity and agency intermingle as one negotiates desires. I wanted to sustain an unresolved state, in which the narrator would be neither entirely in nor out of control.

That's not necessarily a gendered position. The impulse to interrogate imposed passivity could come from a number of sources other than gender, and could be applied to many aspects of power relations. I'm wary of identity-based readings, of saying this work has a particularly female point of view. But that wariness, too, is part of the narrative terms of the work, I think, and maybe part of a renegotiation: an unwillingness to embrace a comfortable or familiar role, a kind of cagey, dogged insistence on finding an outcome that doesn't capitulate to stories that have already been told.

JD: There is a fluidity of language in *Bleeding Optimist* that seems very much conversational. The effect can sometimes be a little like eavesdropping on a telephone conversation; I mean, there's a lot that's left out or assumed between people who know each other well. In fact I'm guessing that a lot of the pages in *Bleeding Optimist* are actually literal transcriptions of telephone conversations, right? If not, they could be. So, for the reader, a strong element of disjunction exists certainly. But the intimacy of this kind of writing, because of its connection to daily life, brings with it, I think, a pervasive awareness of mortality. And this seems to be another aspect, too, of your interest in medical illustrations. What's most revolting about these illustrations, after all, is their proximity to death.

MB: It seems to me that what is sometimes called "ordinary language" is really a source of vast formal possibility, with almost infinitely nuanced rhythms, tonal variations, connotational inferences, contextual implications, and on and on. The Bay Area poet and experimental audio artist Alex Cory has remarked about how frustrated he is when people talk about the "music" of a piece of writing, because it reduces the aural/formal properties unique to language to a secondary status — as if language can be interesting only if it mimics the qualities of another medium. Kind of like calling a poem "painterly" or "filmic," I'd say.

So yes, I wanted the conversational language in *Bleeding Optimist* to have the effects you describe — to evoke the intimate within the disjunctive and vice-versa; to locate the extremes that exist within the everyday, even to the point of death. In that work in particular, I was conscious of finding a very narrow pass between the ordinary and the outrageous, to get to a point where the two would be in some way indistinguishable. The main reason for this was to put the everyday into a new context, to see what assumptions — of language, power, culture, whatever — might be hidden there. Since it's easy to overlook the prejudices or premises that make up the very familiar, those things are often the most ripe for redefinition.

JD: Henri Lefebvre, discussing the naturalization of a reified everyday, writes that, "the terrorist function of forms is ... to maintain the illusion of transparency and reality and to disguise the forms that maintain reality. People living in everyday life refuse to believe their own experience and take it into account." Connected to this, I was thinking about how quietly devastating your account of the everyday can be in *Bleeding Optimist*. For example: "He liked to cook. But not to talk./ He liked to fuck. Drive. Watch TV./ In short, an ordinary person."

At the same time, your writing often strikes me as unembarrassedly confessional, though you're also ironical about this. For example, in *Bleeding Optimist*, there's a moment when you ask: "These people don't really want to know./ Imagine!/ How can they not be burning to hear my confessions?" And of course another aspect of your writing is the way you attempt to distance yourself formally from confessionalism — mediating this impulse through structures of repetition like the ones we've been discussing. I suppose what I'm trying to get at is how you situate your writing practice within the lived experience of your own personal history? Similar to O'Hara, say, there are many passages in your poetry that seem suggestively a clef.

MB: Confessionalism gets back to the issue of conversational language, of being willing to admit the whole spectrum of speech and sentiment as legitimate material. But the danger of that — and the reason confessionalism can be ridiculous or self-indulgent — is that it often relies on an extremely simplistic point of view, oblivious to the complex, almost inconceivably polyvalent context in which any utterance exists. The distancing techniques you mention are my attempts to bring that polyvalence to bear on the simplicity of confessionalism, to resituate the confessional statement within a broader language context. The reason to do this, to use confessionalism at all, is, I guess, to try to understand how different registers of language and utterance — and experience — can be negotiated by a subject.

At times — as with *Coughing Fit*, *Bleeding Optimist*, or the series *Your Golden Gate* — it's been very important to me to address lived experience in writing, where the experience itself provided some complexity, some contradiction or destabilization that was interesting to use as the basis for a work.

At times lived experience has been largely outside the concerns of my writing. *My Recent Disgust With the Act of Thinking*, completed just before *Bleeding Optimist*, is for the most part a collage work, piecing together found text, transcribed conversations, and some images. Lived experience appears only in the form of such artifacts, objects used to build a text, without further contextualization or interpretation. Still, the concerns in that work — obsession, alienation, subjectivity, constructions of sexuality and gender — were certainly related to lived experience, as much as the writing in *Coughing Fit* or *Bleeding Optimist*.

Which is only to say that on some level I think of all my work as grounded in experience. But I do want to distinguish between writing that does and doesn't directly use lived experience as material. *The Boy Who Could Fly* (in progress) is about heroic mythology, childhood, nationalism, corporatization. In the early sections there's an "I" persona that negotiates material, lays out concerns, addresses contradictions. But as the work has gone on, that "I" has disappeared. Other historic/mythic subjects — Icarus, Lincoln, Kennedy, Apollo astronauts, Disney characters, Christ — and the act or image of flying — a trope for risk, triumph, self-destruction, self-knowledge, transcendence, humiliation — have taken over.

I'm interested in pursuing that shift, in letting go, for the moment, of self-ironizing.

JD: Talking earlier about *Bleeding Optimist*, you said that one purpose of the recurring uterine image in the book was that it allowed you to rein in to some degree the text's tendency to dispersion. Considering the diversity of themes and characters in your work-in-progress, *The Boy Who Could Fly* — which strikes me as a much more complex and even a more ambitious work than *Optimist* — has what you called before the narrative's "point of collapse" shifted for you? It seems to me it must be a difficult place out of which to write. In practical terms, for instance, when you revise, how do you resist the temptation to replace highly intuitive connections with logical ones, or do you find it sometimes necessary to give in?

MB: In *The Boy Who Could Fly* I've been interested both in addressing narrative collapse and in resisting it. Much of the first section of the poem is concerned with narrative as a form of knowledge, particularly the limitations and inadequacies of that form. Subsequent sections use pieces of narrative, either found or invented, to create the figure of the title's boy, as a fictional / historical /

mythological composite.

The shift from *Bleeding Optimist* to *The Boy Who Could Fly* is really a matter of scope. The earlier work was bounded by the parameters of the narrator's point of view at a particular place and time. *The Boy Who Could Fly*, in having no single narrator, no single narrative, moves more freely across spatial-temporal boundaries. I wanted, with the "boy," to create a trans-historical figure that would enable connections between different versions of a particular narrative, and between different forms of narrating. Those connections have been a way of overcoming the limitations of narrative that the poem first identifies. In all this, however, here as in *Bleeding Optimist*, narrative frequently alternates with non-narrative. Even though in some ways *The Boy* extends the capacities of narrative beyond those that were used in *Bleeding Optimist*, narrative never really achieves transparency, and never supersedes the "poetic" dimensions of language. The exploration of narrative takes place as much from outside narrative as from within.

The intuitive leaps are often more logically or historically grounded for me than they may appear to the reader. The connections between Kennedy and Christ and astronauts and Disney, for example, seemed obvious to me. Kennedy had an almost messianic status for many people (especially Catholics), a status which was only enhanced by the assassination. Likewise the NASA moon landing seemed at the time to take on a reverential significance that rivaled the birth or resurrection of Christ as a cultural event. As a child my response to these various adult enthusiasms was infused with my own appetite for child-centered entertainment, of which Disney was a particularly dominant source. So animated fairy tales and frontier adventure narratives became linked to actual historical events. In *The Boy Who Could Fly* I wanted to explore that stage of consciousness at which fantasy and fact are interchangeable, not to recreate a child's point of view, but to look at the intersections between historical narrative and fantasy, to look at how, in pursuit of "knowledge" or "truth," we inevitably rely on some metaphor or analogy or leap of thought that belongs as much to fiction as to fact.

JD: I love this passage from the beginning of *The Boy Who Could Fly*: I wanted what I knew/ to be a thing/ that I could hold and handle and give away./ If you know "Ode on a Grecian Urn"/ there is the object / and there is its ornament,/ there is the object taken over/ by the ornament,/ the ode is to the ornament,/ the ode/ becomes the reason for the object/ or the reason for the object to be known,/ but only as the object is a surface/ for the ornament/ and this, right here is none of those./ This is the ode without the object, this is trying to make the object/ from the ode." Would you paraphrase your argument in this passage?

MB: I think it can be paraphrased as anxiety about the relevance of writing — narrative or poetry — to knowledge, or to culture, or to history, an anxiety that's elaborated throughout part I.

With the Keats reference I was thinking about how a work can be embedded in a literally archaeological way in cultural history. As a meditation on a specific artifact from an exhaustively interpreted period, the Keats "Ode" can claim a cultural pedigree that I don't think can be invoked with such succinctness today. In *The Boy*, with references ranging from the Old Testament to network television, one thing I'm trying to ask is what counts as cultural relevance in a work of literature today.

JD: Among the materials you utilize in *The Boy Who Could Fly* are short passages of art criticism relating to Ghilberti's and Brunelleschi's paintings of Abraham and Isaac. This one, for example, attempts to arbitrate the stylistic differences between the two: "Ghilberti achieves a composition that is perhaps less daring than Brunelleschi's but more cohesive and unified. ... Vigor and strength of statement are subordinated to grace and smoothness ..." And it continues in this vein. This of course is the language of high connoisseurship, of authority, and so on, but also, at least for me, of seduction in the way it seems to perform the fiction of the art object's complete transparency to meaning. But what function do these passages have in the poem?

MB: One thing I'm after in *The Boy* is to follow certain stories or archetypes through their reiterations at various points in history. The Abraham and Isaac story first shows up in the poem at

the beginning of part IV, with passages taken from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (which uses Abraham and Isaac as the basis for a meditation on the ethical paradox of faith). The Abraham/Isaac story occurred to me for inclusion in the poem after I'd been working with the Icarus myth; I was interested in the theme that began to emerge of the vulnerable son of a heroic father. Isaac, of course, is both more passive and more fortunate than Icarus. At other points the same theme is elaborated with Lincoln, Kennedy, Christ, and the astronauts.

With the Abraham/Isaac story, moving from Kierkegaard to the Gardner *History of Art* text took the theme simultaneously forward to the 20th century and backward to the Renaissance. Each rendition of the story — by the philosopher, the artists, the academic — was a further remove from the original. I wanted to sink into those layers of retelling, in part to look at how conflicted the concept of an "original" can be.

JD: How would you situate your work in relation both to the poetry scene in San Francisco today, and to earlier avant-garde traditions (Language writing especially)? I mean, it might be interesting to hear how you would explain to someone not very familiar with contemporary poetry the differences between the kinds of things you write and what the Language writers were (or still are) up to.

MB: Being roughly a generation younger than the Language poets has given me the option of taking certain Language strategies or positions as points of departure. The rigorous skepticism about a fixed, privileged subject, the sustained interrogation of reference as essentially illusory, the ultimate insistence on language as a code with a system of self-reference that precedes the things it refers to, are all concepts which I found already articulated for me when I began reading Language writing as a young writer. My own direction as a writer, and, I think, that of a number of my peers, has been to regard Language writing as a form of ground zero, to ask, what comes next? If language is ultimately a code, if all signification can be revealed as a form of coercion or enforced limitation, the fact remains that, as a code, language is a means of making meaning, if you allow for "meaning" to be something negotiated between participants, not something absolute.

To me the most interesting thing going on in writing now is the exploration of that process of negotiation. If you take for granted the discrediting of the unified subject, of objective meaning, how do you participate in language as a writer? How do you understand forms of language usage and the power relations they represent? How do you understand agency? How do you achieve it? To ask those questions, many younger writers have shifted their focus from what language is to how it is used, to allow multiple subject positions and social contexts to enter the work, to follow the negotiation of meaning that takes place in the spaces between those positions or contexts.

In a word, I don't hate speech, or the simulation of speech in writing. I don't hate representation. I don't hate the illusion of transparency. But I also believe in the necessity of acknowledging those things as artifice when they appear. The shift from Language writing to writing now could be summed up as the difference between stripping meaning from over-determined code, and restoring the capacity for meaning to stripped code.

As far as situating myself among Bay Area writers now, the scene here is in a period of what Pamela Lu has called "balkanization" (in the sense of fragmentation, not hostility, though of course some vexation marks the boundaries between groups.) I think everyone under 40 acknowledges the influence of the Language poets in some way, but there's no dominant opinion on how to do that.

Many of those whose work I follow closely are interested in narrative — Pamela, with her Proustian extension and elaboration of premises; Renee Gladman, combining Wittgensteinian language theory with a socially contextualized, self-reflective subject; Jay Schwartz, creating cyborg-horror fictions that invoke Language poetics in their cognitive leaps and hybrid form.

And there are far more whose work happens mostly outside narrative — Beth Murray, exploring post-humanistic cognitive empathies that unsettle received definitions of intellect; David Larsen, constructing cosmopolitan punk zines, scrapbooks of cultural detritus ranging from the learned to the

alarming to the numb; Lauren Gudath, working through a wry, elliptical erudition that can be both humorous and biting succinct; Chris Vitiello (who, though he lives in North Carolina, is closely connected with many writers here), welding an amalgam of Francis Ponge, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Cornell, Ron Silliman, and Barret Watten into poem-artifacts that are as likely to include plastic toys and tin foil as they are words; Alex Cory, examining the intricate variations and implications of tone as it informs both writing and speech, recently developing a sort of neo-Personism, an aesthetics of small lyrics addressed to individual readers.

My conversations with writers in the Bay Area are as likely to be concerned with the New York School or early modernism as they are with Language writing. While we're all aware of the still-evolving legacy of Language writers, I don't hear as much concern here with responding to that legacy as I do, say, in New York. I think that's in part because the community, and the geography, are small enough here to enable people to keep up with one another's work on a more individual basis, without grouping it into schools. It may also be that the Bay Area attracts writers who are less interested in arguments about lineage. I know writers who've left San Francisco for New York, for example, because of what they felt was the lack of agenda here. But I find that the combination of individualism and community here are well-suited to what I'm trying to do.

JD: Why do you tend to prefer to write longish or serial poems? And when you first begin writing a long poem, do you have a preconceived notion of the form it will take? Or is that something which is continuously evolving as you write?

MB: Some years ago I became dissatisfied, as a writer and a reader, with short, individual works. I want the sustained, elaborated investigation that a longer work allows, to be able to pursue multiple implications of an idea. Lately I've rediscovered the value of the concentrated, focused, quick effect of a short poem. But I still want to place short pieces — my own or others' — in the context of a larger body of work.

I often write fragments for several months before things begin to coalesce into a long work. After I have a few continuous pages, I usually begin to perceive the scope of the piece, and work along some projected trajectory — though the trajectory continually evolves, and usually works go nowhere near where I thought they would. The real effort is to develop constraints — thematic or structural — that are both focused and flexible enough to sustain interest (mine first, but also the reader's). The Boy has been an interesting work for me so far because I've been continually surprised at how new material seems to link to the original premise.

JD: Perhaps we should conclude with your saying something about the Second Story Books New Narrativist Series. You're also, I know, putting together a new online literary publication called Narrativity. What kind of forum are you attempting to provide with these projects?

MB: Second Story Books grew out of editing Proliferation, as I realized that I was seeing a lot of long or serial works that seemed to have a common agenda, in working through a relationship between the language-as-code tenets of Language writing and the language-as-representation premises of narrative.

As a group these works reveal a significant set of issues that have been emerging in the past few years, an important "balkan state" that's defining innovative writing right now. The book series is a way of bringing attention to that.

The Narrativity online journal is another dimension of that, intended as a place where writers working with innovative/experimental narrative can develop a critical discourse on their own and others' work. Contemporary critical writing is lacking a thorough articulation of ideas about theory-based narration. Co-editors Camille Roy, Robert Glück, Gail Scott and I want to provide a forum where "narrative" can be examined with the same critical complexity now accorded to "poetry".