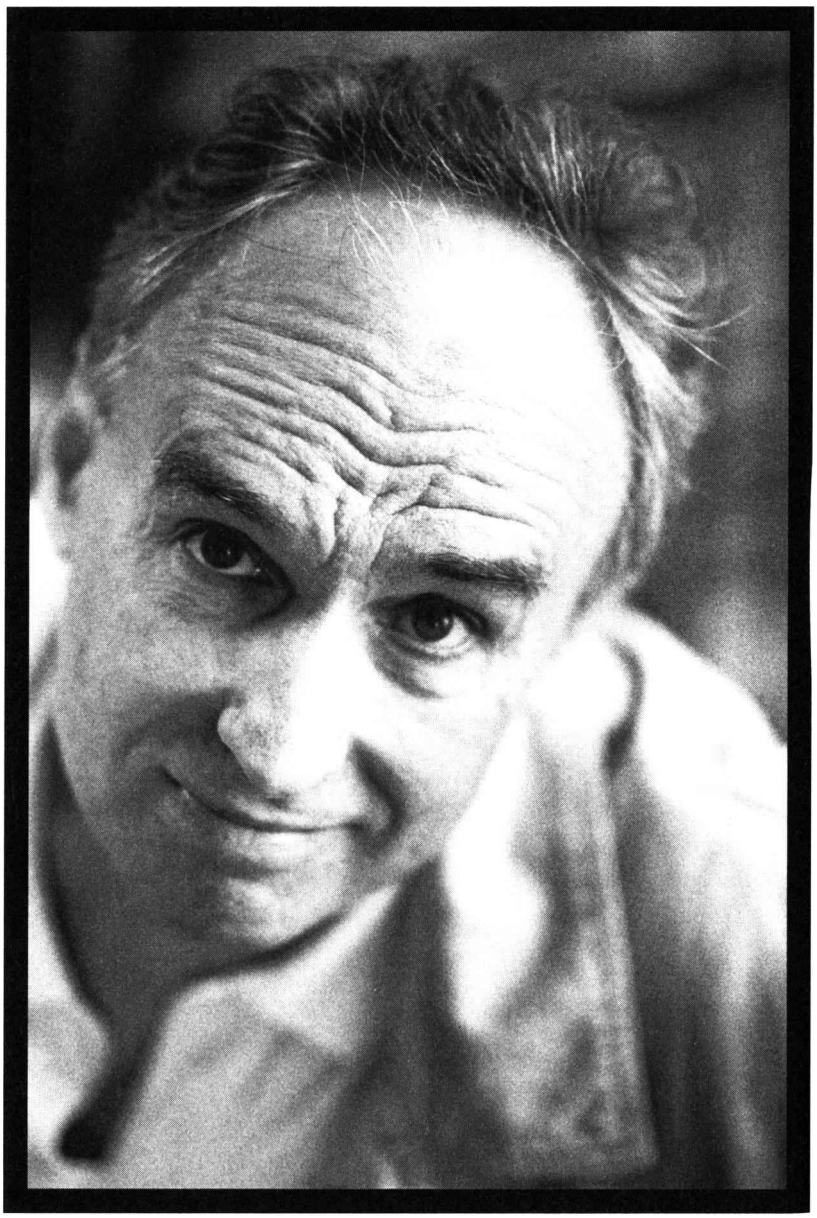

Pre-existing Forms: We Fill Them and When We Fill Them We Change Them and Are Changed*

BY FRANK BIDART

We need a model for the relation, in poetry, between continuity and departure. When a writer imagines a poem he or she imagines a shape there, there where there was nothing. How, by what process, is the new shape imagined? Writers use very different terms to describe this experience. They experience it in different ways. Neither poets nor theorists will ever agree on how to describe it. All I can offer you today is how I have conceptualized my own practice.

Several years ago Dan Halpern asked many writers to respond to Borges' "Borges and I," by writing something of approximately the same length, using it as a springboard. (The responses were collected in a volume titled *Who's Writing This?*, The Ecco Press, 1995.) Reading the Borges piece, invited to consider Borges' paradigm of the relationship between the writing self and the inner self as the model of my own, what rose in me was that elemental *No* out of which so much writing rises. I hardly knew what I thought about these issues until faced with the paradigm so strikingly offered by Borges. This is the Borges piece:

**A talk given at the University of Chicago and as the Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College.*

Opposite page: *Frank Bidart* by Emma Dodge Hanson

BORGES AND I

It is to my other self, to Borges, that things happen. I walk about Buenos Aires and I pause, almost mechanically, to contemplate the arch of an entry or the portal of a church: news of Borges comes to me in the mail, and I see his name on a short list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I am fond of hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the etymology of words, the tang of coffee, and the prose of Stevenson: the other one shares these enthusiasms, but in a rather vain, theatrical way. It would be an exaggeration to call our relationship hostile. I live, I agree to go on living, so that Borges may fashion his literature; that literature justifies me. I do not mind admitting that he has managed to write a few worthwhile pages, but these pages cannot save me, perhaps because good writing belongs to nobody, not even to my other, but rather to language itself, to the tradition. Beyond that, I am doomed to oblivion, utterly doomed, and no more than certain flashes of my existence can survive in the work of my other. Little by little I am surrendering everything to him, although I am well aware of his perverse habit of falsifying and exaggerating. Spinoza understood that everything wishes to continue in its own being: a stone wishes to be a stone, eternally, a tiger a tiger. I must go on in Borges, not in myself (if I am anyone at all). But I recognize myself much less in the books he writes than in many others or in the clumsy plucking of a guitar. Years ago I tried to cut free from him and I went from myths of suburban life to games with time and infinity; but those games belong to Borges now and I will have to come up with something else. And so my life leaks away and I lose everything, and everything passes into oblivion, or to my other.

I cannot tell which one of us is writing this page.

Borges' brilliant formal decision is of course the division of his sentences into two paragraphs: the first extremely long and the second extremely short. The first presents a locked, parasitic, essentially unchanging relationship between the public, writing self that makes works of art, and

the private self—separate, disdainful, unable to find in the creations of the writing "other" more than traces of itself. The writing self theatricalizes and exaggerates what the private self must continue to live so that the maker can continue to make. The private self is not changed or fed by the writing self: "I lose everything, and everything passes into oblivion, or to my other."

This locked situation is radically changed by the second paragraph, which is a single sentence: "I cannot tell which one of us is writing this page." These few words call into question the large block of words resting above them. Words—on the page, *voice*—are the prerogative of the writing self, in the paradigm that we have been offered. But can we trust this paradigm? As if by magical dispensation the inner *I* has been granted words, which is to say that we have been given access to it; but have these words been made by the vain, exaggerating, theatricalizing self? The first paragraph is cast as complaint; or is it, perversely, pre-emptive, a way of defending the inner self against the inevitable limitations of what has been made by the writing self? By a single final sentence, the abrupt bravado of a rhetorical *coup de théâtre*, Borges succeeds in throwing everything that has preceded it into question.

Borges' structure—the long initial paragraph suddenly made problematic by a brief final single sentence—rests on how cogent, how compelling one finds the vision of the writing life that dominates the body of his text. When I first read "Borges and I," I felt almost violently that it did not reflect my own writing life. It did not reflect my own relation to my writing self. Trying to "fill" Borges' paradigm, measuring what I had experienced as a writer against the model offered by Borges, instinctively made me feel that whatever I made in response to the Borges text had to be very different formally. As I began to piece together sentences that I felt embodied *my* relation to my writing self, what I found was that each sentence had to be a separate unit, set off by white space. Each sentence—some long and tumbling, made up of spliced sentences breathlessly joined, some short—had to command the attention as a separate plateau or stage, to be replaced by the next. The movement must not be "large monolithic thing upset by new but crucial thing," but something that absorbs the attention replaced by something that changes or reverses or at least adds to it, that is replaced in turn by something that will be replaced in turn. I

tried to make something that not only argued with "Borges and I," but itself exemplified how the attempt to inhabit the form of one work of art can generate the very different form of another. This is what I sent to Dan Halpern:

BORGES AND I

We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed.

The desolating landscape in Borges' "Borges and I"—in which the voice of "I" tells us that its other self, Borges, is the self who makes literature, who in the process of making literature falsifies and exaggerates, while the self that is speaking to us now must go on living so that Borges may continue to fashion literature—is seductive and even oddly comforting, but, I think, false.

The voice of this "I" asserts a disparity between its essential self and its worldly second self, the self who seeks embodiment through making things, through work, who in making takes on something false, inessential, inauthentic.

The voice of this "I" tells us that Spinoza understood that everything wishes to continue in its own being, a stone wishes to be a stone eternally, that all "I" wishes is to remain unchanged, itself.

With its lonely emblematic title, "Borges and I" seems to be offered as a paradigm for the life of consciousness, the life of knowing and making, the life of the writer.

The notion that Frank has a self that has remained the same and that knows what it would be if its writing self did not exist—like all assertions about the systems that hold sway beneath the moon, the opposite of this seems to me to be true, as true.

When Borges' "I" confesses that Borges falsifies and exaggerates it seems to do so to cast aside falsity and exaggeration, to attain an entire candor unobtainable by Borges.

This "I" therefore allows us to enter an inaccessible magic space, a hitherto inarticulate space of intimacy and honesty earlier denied us, where voice, for the first time, has replaced silence.

—Sweet fiction, in which bravado and despair beckon from a cold panache, in which the protected essential self suffers flashes of its existence to be immortalized by a writing self that is incapable of performing its actions without mixing our essence with what is false.

Frank had the illusion, when he talked to himself in the cliches he used when he talked to himself, that when he made his poems he was changed in making them, that arriving at the order the poem suddenly arrived at out of the chaos of the materials the poem let enter itself out of the chaos of life, consciousness then, only then, could know itself, Sherlock Holmes was somebody or something before cracking its first case but not Sherlock Holmes, act is the cracked mirror not only of motive but self, *no other way*, tiny mirror that fails to focus in small the whole of the great room.

But Frank had the illusion that his poems also had cruelly replaced his past, that finally they were all he knew of it though he knew they were not, everything else was shards refusing to make a pattern and in any case he had written about his mother and father until the poems saw as much as he saw and saw more and he only saw what he saw in the act of making them.

He had never had a self that wished to continue in its own being, survival meant ceasing to be what its being was.

Frank had the illusion that though the universe of one of his poems seemed so close to what seemed his own universe at the second of writing it that he wasn't sure how they differed even

though the paraphernalia often differed, after he had written it its universe was never exactly his universe, and so, soon, it disgusted him a little, the mirror was dirty and cracked.

Secretly he was glad it was dirty and cracked, because after he had made a big order, a book, only when he had come to despise it a little, only after he had at last given up the illusion that this was what was, only then could he write more.

He felt terror at the prospect of becoming again the person who could find or see or make no mirror, for even Olivier, trying to trap the beast who had killed his father, when he suavely told Frank as Frank listened to the phonograph long afternoons lying on the bed as a kid, when Olivier told him what art must be, even Olivier insisted that art is a mirror held up by an artist who himself needs to see something, held up before a nature that recoils before it.

We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed.

Everything in art is a formal question, so he tried to do it in prose with much blank white space.

Writing this, I felt gripped by something that struggled to find existence through the medium of language, but whose source was not language. It is an experience that I have had again and again, that animated every poem that I have written that I think has any value. It could be a character, a consciousness, like Ellen West or Nijinsky; a very particular grief over the death of a very particular individual; an emotion like love or hatred or both-love-and-hate-at-the-same-time; or something that might seem to other eyes abstract, like woe at the collapse (at the beginning of the twentieth century) of the structure of Western metaphysics. Each of these things had been written about before, but something essential in my sense of its

existence remained outside the circle of existence, had not *attained* existence until it had found the made body that is a work of art. Or, better: the made body, the representation that it had attained, had left something central out, had not manifested the sense that I had of it. Become matter, become the body of a work of art, it can become an object of contemplation.

Trying to make a poem, one measures the thing-that-is-struggling-into-existence against the containers that the world, the history of art offer it for existence. Artists, poets ransack the world's art for ways that art has been made, to increase their imagination of the forms that-which-is-within-them can begin to inhabit. By "forms" I mean not simply verse forms—a sonnet, a villanelle—but the shapes, styles, silhouettes, narratives, linguistic patterns, ways of making poems, ways of making meaning, that language and the world offer to organize the materials of a work of art. I say *begin* to inhabit, because, as in "Borges and I," the forms inevitably change as the attempt is made to fill them.

Now let me give examples. The forms that are "filled" and change in much of what I've written are foregrounded: Ovid's version of the Myrrha story in Book X of *Metamorphoses*, the narrative from Tacitus that forms the basis for "The Return." But in most works of art traces of the forms that are filled and change are erased, invisible. My poem "The Yoke" is an example:

THE YOKE

don't worry I know you're dead
but tonight

turn your face again
toward me

when I hear your voice there is now
no direction in which to turn

I sleep and wake and sleep and wake and sleep and wake and

but tonight
turn your face again

toward me

see upon my shoulders is the yoke
that is not a yoke

don't worry I know you're dead
but tonight

turn your face again

This is obviously a *cri de coeur*, but it is a cri de coeur hanging on formal precedents. It was written several months after the death of my friend Joe Brainard. I had written an elegy for him titled "In Memory of Joe Brainard," but writing this by no means exhausted my sense of woe. Then, in the middle of a summer night, I heard Al Green's great recording of Kris Kristofferson's "For the Good Times," which begins:

don't look so sad I know it's over
but life goes on

and this world
keeps on turning

The dynamic of the opening lines caught me: "Don't. . ." "I know. . ." "But. . ." Could I fill this pattern with my own situation?

don't worry I know you're dead
but tonight

turn your face again
toward me

Though I was only half-aware of it at the time, "turn" must have suggested itself because of Kristofferson's "turning." After someone dies one often hears the voice that one in actuality can no longer hear: "turning" to hear it gave me my next couplet.

when I hear your voice there is now
no direction in which to turn

The empty repetitiousness of the diurnal round without the dead one then is asserted, to convince the dead one to break the repetitions by his presence. The plea is a *da capo* repetition of the opening, slightly changed, isolating "toward me":

I sleep and wake and sleep and wake and sleep and wake and

but tonight
turn your face again

toward me

For several days I had been toying fruitlessly with lines that had nothing to do with Joe, shaped in the form of assertion-by-denial (or denial-by-assertion) characteristic of mystical writing in many traditions. Suddenly I thought that I could apply this to the burden—*desired* burden—of what I now felt:

see upon my shoulders is the yoke
that is not a yoke

Like a million songs and poems, the poem then ends with another *da capo* of its beginning, but starker, truncated:

don't worry I know you're dead
but tonight

turn your face again

That's the poem. It's little more than a series of repetitions of the Kristofferson "Don't. . . I know. . . But" pattern, cut across by the characteristic pattern of a mystical conundrum. What gives it shape and

point, of course, is not an abstract manipulation of patterns, but the shape, the logic and dynamic of what I was feeling.

When I had finished the poem, I showed it with trepidation to friends who knew the Al Green recording well. Would they think the poem plagiarized? They mocked me, and said that my theft was invisible.

Another example, with another problem. One of the biggest puzzles that I had in writing the Myrrha section of "The Second Hour of the Night" was Myrrha's nurse. She is the hinge of the entire action: when she learns of Myrrha's desire for her father, she arranges to trick the father into accepting his daughter into his bed. The nurse's motivation in the myth's extant sources is extremely weak, or non-existent; why would anyone, with her charge's care at heart, react as she does? After months of brooding, I was able to invent a motivation, springing from a story about the father told by Robert Graves. The price of believability or comprehension was innocence: she was no longer "good." Still I couldn't see her: how she moved, talked. Try as I might, no unified presence sprang into my head. The nurses that I knew from literature (*Romeo and Juliet, Phèdre*) didn't help. Without a presence in my head, I couldn't give her a body in the world.

Then I saw Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, his version of *Macbeth*. I had seen it years before, but all I remembered was Toshiro Mifune's (Macbeth's) death scene. This time what compelled my attention was Isuzu Yamada as Lady Macbeth, and how Kurosawa had staged her. Speaking in an eerily even tone, moving as if the source of her motion were perfectly collected and self-known and inaccessible, she again and again emerges from darkness and retreats into darkness. She is the aide whose infinite capacities to arrange everything make her the source of power. Suddenly I could see Myrrha's nurse. What remained was to invent verbal patterns in English that embodied the way that Yamada spoke and moved onscreen.

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What I am offering is a poetics of embodiment. "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed." We constantly fill language with something whose source is not language. What is not

language finds embodiment in language by struggling to inhabit the forms—multifarious shapes, images, bits of language, patterns of language and gesture—that not only the world of art but the entire perceived world offer it. Inhabiting the forms inevitably means *changing* the forms, if what is not yet language, what seeks manifestation or embodiment, is to show its nature. If its *exact* nature had found embodiment before, could one find the energy to forge its presence in art? The vehicle of such change, the writer, is transformed by encountering as art, as a made object within the world, what before remained only formless or inchoate within.

When I was an undergraduate in the late fifties, the dominant ideal was the sort of poem written by Marianne Moore—the ideal way to write a poem, the manner of Moore. But this meant, for me, silence—because nothing within me that animated the desire to make art could find expression, could find light or embodiment, in Moore's manner. Every five to ten years, the style or styles that dominate the magazines change: for many years it was Eliot, then Pound and Williams, then Lowell and Plath, then Ashbery, then Bishop. (And of course in different magazines different styles dominate.) As if, for a given moment, there is a single smart or bright way to make poetry, and everything that animates a poem must be poured into it. This helps, of course, no one: a great many bad poems are written; the author imitated must survive the period when readers become sick of his or her conventions.

What young writers must do, I think, is learn how, for each of them, meaning is experienced—how significance comes at them. Then find a way to build structures that allow this to happen. The commonplace is that poets think in terms of "images." But I doubt that *I* do, at least in the usual way; I'm more likely to remember something said than the color of a dress. To become a writer I had to learn how to build structures on paper that embodied, for me, access to the experience of significance. Each of us perceives, of course, significance: each of us builds, willy-nilly, a world view, a structure of how things are put together, what things matter, what compels us. If you are an artist these things want to force themselves into your art; if the ways that you can discover to make a work of art do not let you do this, your art is rendered silent, or trivial.

I will end with a metaphor for the process that I have been discussing. Everything said about the process thus far has been embedded in a narrative about how it became crystallized for me, how other poems that I have written embodied it. Now I want you to think not narratively, but emblematically. The emblem that I offer is not a visual image, not a bit of dialogue or story. It is Alice Raveau's complete recording in 1935 of "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice" from Gluck's *Orphée*.

A bit of background. At least up through the middle of the twentieth century there was much critical discussion about the characteristics and relative value of the "Classic" and the "Romantic." T.E. Hulme's "Romanticism and Classicism" was of course a crucial text in the history of Modernism: Hulme used what he saw as the characteristics of Classicism—hard, clear images, concreteness, scepticism about the infinite—to scour the excesses of verse at the beginning of the century. My sense is that sometime after Randall Jarrell's extraordinary preface to his first book, *The Rage For the Lost Penny* (1940)—in which the distinction between Classicism and Romanticism ferociously engages him, though it seems to land him in no man's land—the distinction became increasingly irrelevant, both to theory and practice.

What I am suggesting, of course, has characteristics that are both Classic and Romantic. It is Classic in that it emphasizes the primacy of pre-existing forms, that nothing is created *ex nihilo*. (One reason that we cannot imagine what Beethoven would think of rock and roll is that our own experience of it is inseparable from an awareness of the formal changes in Western music from his time until our own.) It is Romantic in that it emphasizes that what generates words is not words or things, but some movement of the spirit—a movement that the poet seeks to manifest in words but whose essence remains illimitable, often at war with words. (The great poet of this is Wordsworth, who often at his moments of greatest intensity confesses that his subject eludes language and metaphor: "those first affections,/ Those shadowy recollections,/ Which, be they what they may,/ Are yet the fountain light of all our day,/ Are yet a master light of all our seeing. . . .") It is Classic in that it emphasizes the primacy of making, of invention. It is Romantic in that it imagines no limits on the shapes that an artist may find necessary to make.

Raveau's recording of Gluck's aria seems to me an emblem of this because of its severe, even extreme emphasis on the form or shape of the aria, the relentless tread of its unfolding—and the union of ferocity with boundlessness that this relentless tread allows. It is almost twice as long as any other recording that I know. The Callas recording is four minutes twenty-five seconds; the Raveau seven minutes eleven seconds. Callas is (as a character in one of my poems says) my favorite singer, but this seems to me one of the few instances where someone else's recording is finer, more revelatory. I want you to hear the very opening of the Callas recording, to hear something like a standard tempo, and what this allows the singer. [*One minute and forty-seven seconds of the Callas recording is played, down through "entends ma voix qui t'appelle."*]

Newer recordings with original instruments, informed by much recent research and scholarship, tend to be even faster. In this light, the extreme slowness of the Raveau recording, conducted by Henri Tomasi, could be accused of being "Romantic." But the effect of the tempo here is to emphasize the implacable presence of the formal repetitions, *not* to allow the pulse to shift with unpredictable rushes of human feeling. It is as if time ceases. At the very end, Raveau runs out of breath, and can only manage a rather strangled tone; the conductor does not speed up even momentarily to help her. The aria itself goes for the jugular ("*Eurydice! Eurydice!*" followed by silence; then "*Mortel silence! Vaine esperance! Quelle souffrance!*") just as I think that all great art, whether Classic or Romantic, must. The recording embodies this with aesthetic means that are almost demonic in their single-mindedness and severity.

To my mind, in its poise this recording unites the Classic and the Romantic, and stands for the process governing the relation between continuity and departure, the past and new creation, that I have struggled to define. I end with Alice Raveau:

J'ai perdu mon Eurydice,
rien n'égale mon malheur;
sort cruel! quelle rigueur!
Rien n'égale mon malheur.
Je succombe á ma douleur.
Eurydice, Eurydice,
réponds. Quel supplice!

Réponds á moi.
C'est ton époux, ton époux fidèle;
entends ma voix qui t'appelle.
J'ai perdu mon Eurydice, *etc.*
Mortel silence!
Vaine espérance!
Quelle souffrance!
Quelle tourment déchire mon coeur!
J'ai perdu mon Eurydice, *etc.*

[I have lost my Eurydice,
nothing equals my unhappiness;
cruel fate! what harshness!
Nothing equals my unhappiness.
I succumb to my grief.
Eurydice, Eurydice,
answer. What torture!
Answer me.
It is your husband, your faithful husband;
hear my voice that calls to you.
I have lost my Eurydice, *etc.*
Mortal silence!
Vain hope!
What suffering!
What torment rends my heart!
I have lost my Eurydice, *etc.*]

At the end of the above sentences, there is this notation: "After listening to Alice Raveau, the audience suddenly changed into a flock of birds, and, rising on their new wings, flew away."