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Some Thoughts on 'A Mind Thinking'

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A new catchphrase has entered the discourse of and about twentieth-century poetry unthinkingly. Although the catchphrase, which defines the task of the poem as that of portraying "not a thought, a mind thinking," has achieved great popularity --- it has been employed by Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Bernstein, and James Longenbach --- it is highly problematic. Even a glance at its formulation reveals its inherent difficulties, its ambiguities and its datedness. While the poem of "a mind thinking" is presented as a radical alternative to the poem as a static product of thought, it presents a picture of the mind's activity that is not at all radical. "A mind thinking" seems natural, eloquent, fitting; its parts --- "mind" and "thinking" --- correspond with a Cartesian clarity which, even after its encounter with the all-powerful evil demon of doubt, could confidently claim that its mental phenomena were the results of thinking rather than of dreaming or delusions. In a century following Rimbaud's anti-Cartesian declaration, "I am another," and in a century suspicious of the mind's mechanisms following its psychoanalytic boom and the work of postmodern critics from Barthes to Irigaray who describe the self as a construct, that such a formulation could become so popular seems incredible. Thought must be given to the ways in which this catchphrase has metamorphosed from its origins as a merely descriptive tool and as a passionate though uncritical expression of poetic ambition and praise to its most recent and most troubling manifestation as a critical device for system-building. Thought must be given to the meanings and the uses and the meanings of the uses of this increasingly problematic catchphrase.

The phrase, "not a thought, but a mind thinking," was first used by the critic Morris W. Croll in his essay, "The Baroque Style in Prose" (in *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm: Essays by Morris W. Croll,* Princeton University Press, 1966), merely as part of a description; Croll says of his essay that "its purpose is to describe the *form* of...baroque prose" (208). Although non-evaluative, CroWs exciting descriptions of baroque prose --- "It preferred the forms that express the energy and

labour of minds seeking the truth, not without dust and heat, to the forms that express a contented sense of the enjoyment and possession of it" (208) --- could be compelling and helpful for anyone trying to express her own desire to be expressive in ways which challenge the norm, and, indeed, Elizabeth Bishop employs Croll's concept and formulation of the baroque to argue for her own poetic ideas and idiosyncrasies.

Although in his essay Croll discusses specifically the baroque style of certain Renaissance writers,

Bishop does not confine her use of Croll's thought to any historical period, employing it instead in many contexts and for many purposes. In "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry," a student essay written for the *Vassar Review*, Bishop quotes numerous extended passages from Croll's essay in an attempt to describe and celebrate how Hopkins "times" the delivery of his ideas, how Hopkins catches and preserves "the movement of an idea --- the point being to crystallize it early enough so that it still has movement" (*Vassar Review* 23, February 1934: 5-7). Although Bishop employs Croll's thought in her essay on Hopkins, it is used rather specifically to discuss Hopkins's "sprung rhythm." Additionally, Croll's "a mind thinking," though important, is just one of many metaphors Bishop uses to discuss Hopkins's adjustable, largely accentual lines. Bishop also states that Hopkins's lines are "[r]eminiscent of the caprice of a perfectly trained acrobat: falling through the air to snatch his partner's ankles he can yet, within the fall, afford an extra turn and flourish, in safety, without spoiling the form of his flight." Bishop also compares the "difficult devices" of Hopkins's poetry to "sudden storms," and notes that "[a] single stanza can be as full of, aflame with, motion as one of Van Gogh's cedar trees."

Expanding on her use of Croll's thought in her essay on Hopkins, Bishop also employs Croll's thought to describe and defend her own work, her own rhythms and words. In an aesthetic debate which took place in a correspondence (recorded in part in *One Art: Letters*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994, and recounted in *Verse*, 4 : 1, November 1987) begun at the suggestion of Yvor Winters, Bishop, in her senior year at Vassar College, took a stand against any smoothing over of her work, arguing with Donald E. Stanford, a Harvard graduate student, that the rough rhythms and odd word choice in the poems she had shared with him were intentional.

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Regarding the rough rhythms, she states, "If I try to write smoothly I find myself perverting the meaning for the sake of smoothness." Of the odd words she states, "They are the perceptions which give rise to the whole thing, so I don't see how they could be very well left out or smoothed over" (11). Searching for a way to express her aesthetic stance, Bishop turns to Croll, quoting extensively from his essay, concluding, "But the best part, which perfectly describes the sort of poetic convention I should like to make for myself ... is this: 'Their purpose (the writers of Baroque prose) was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking ... They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth'" (12).

Bishop's use of Croll's thought, already various during her undergraduate years, changed in later years so as to concentrate on techniques important to Bishop's later work. As Brett C. Miller (in *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) notes,

> More than thirty years later, she recalled [Croll's essay] in an interview, calling Hopkins a great innovator in "poetic psychology." Remembering the baroque sermon's attempt to "dramatize the mind in action rather than in repose," she saw a clear example of this tendency also in stanza 28 of Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland":
>
> > But how shall I ... make me room there:
> > Reach me a ... Fancy, come faster ---

> Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,
> Thing that she ... There then! ...
>
> Bishop's later apparent digression and self-revision in her poems, much remarked on, are her version of Hopkins's method, the baroque preacher's psychological methods, which she admired. (54)

A few conclusions necessary for the further investigation of Croll's thought may be made regarding Bishop's use of the phrase "a mind thinking." First, Bishop's use of the phrase is mutable; it helps, as one way among others, to express difficult ideas about Hopkins's

oddly intricate rhythms, it helps defend her own work by appealing to an authority, and it explains one of the origins of "Bishop's later apparent digression and self-revision," including, most famously, "One Art" --- "(*Write* it!)." Additionally, though Croll's thought may be very important to, and perhaps very present in, Bishop's poetics, it also does not encapsulate all of Bishop. Although Thomas J. Travisano (in *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988) sees Croll's thought in many of Bishop's undertakings, he also notes that while, in "The Fish," Bishop gets a "psychological dimension, the drama of the mind thinking ... [from] Hopkins and his baroque forebearers," "the moral necessity behind scrupulous observation she found in Moore. The dramatically delayed recognition of symbolic value she found in Poe.... It took Bishop to fuse them in a style that resembles her sources almost not at all" (71). In all, though "a mind thinking" may be an expedient phrase, indicating with some flair the signs of dramatic process one generally expects --- whether it be in a Romantic descriptive-meditative poem, a Victorian dramatic monologue, or any of the modern or postmodern derivatives of these models --- of romantic writing, it is not a phrase sufficient enough to name other aspects necessary for a full consideration of poets and poems, for it specifies neither what nor how its mind thinks.

Decades after Bishop's various encounters with Croll's work, Charles Bernstein, in his essay, "Writing and Method" (in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), employs Croll's thought to critique what and how some of the "minds" of twentieth-century poems were --- or were not --- thinking, attempting to establish an alternative to "contemporary plain styles" (223) and to "[t]he contemporary expository mode" (224), styles of writing that too often are thought of as the only natural, legitimate ways to write. Bernstein claims that Croll's elucidation of the baroque style in prose describes "a development in some ways paralleling such current critiques as this one [that is, Bernstein's own] of contemporary expository forms, in its rejection of a static predetermined formality and its attempt 'to portray not a thought, but a mind thinking'" (222). Remarking that "[t]wentieth-century writing has had as one of its most philosophically interesting projects the mapping of consciousness," Bernstein praises the styles of writing that undertook "the mapping" --- "stream-of-consciousness, psychic

automatism, surrealism, memory, free-association, impressionism, expressionism" (230), styles, it should be noted, that Bishop never had in mind when using Croll's thought --- for the alternatives they provide. Bernstein states, "A value of this writing for epistemological inquiry was the alternative model of mind it provided... since the organization of words and phrases [in writing that maps consciousness], is based on the perceiving and experiencing and remembering subject rather than on the more expositorily developmental lines of the 'objective' and impersonal styles that picture the mind (and self) as a neutral observer of a given world" (230). Additionally, Bernstein notes that this new style of writing creates a new type of reading, "a reading that could be extended much beyond the specific writing practices itself," the major result of which is that "all writing becomes open interpretation as the trace of a self" (230).

While Bernstein argues the case for the significance for poetry of "a mind thinking" at a time when, he believes, the expository mode has an almost totalizing force, he does not fully promote the type of poetry that maps consciousness. According to Bernstein, while the poetry of "a mind thinking" "does in fact break the spell of writing seen as a transparent medium to the world beyond it ... it does so only by making a projection of self central to its methodology" (231). Consequently, the reader is not permitted to actively engage with the text. This result is, according to Bernstein, available only from a different kind of text:

> The text is again seen as a map, but in the sense of a model, or outline, or legend and not trace. Rather than work which is the product of the "author's" projection/memory/associative process, it is work for the reader's (viewer's) projection/construction. The text calls upon the reader to be actively involved in the process of continuing its meaning, the reader becoming a neutral observer neither to a described exteriority nor to an enacted interiority. The text formally involves the process of response/interpretation and in so doing makes the reader aware of herself or himself as producer as well as consumer of the meaning. (232)

In a later verse-essay, "Artifice of Absorption" (in *A Poetics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), Bernstein calls this type of writing "anti-absorbant" and meditates extensively on its

possibilities, contrasting it to absorbing "mass entertainment, from bestsellers to TV to 'common voice' poetry" (55), comparing and contrasting it with Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect and struggling against critics such as Helen Vendler, whom Bernstein believes practice critical absorption and promote work that encourages aesthetic absorption. Referring to Vendler's introduction to *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Bernstein writes,

> But perhaps
> the most irritating thing about
> Vendler's manner of argument is that it is always
> referring to what "all" poems do, making it
> impossible for her to even consider that some poems
> may come into being just because they don't do what
> some other poems have done. Vendler says

> she hopes readers will be provoked by some of the
> anthologized poems to say --- "'Heavens, I recognize
> the place, I know it!' It is the effect every poet
> hopes for." I would hope
> readers might be provoked to say of some poems,
> "Hell, I don't recognize the place or the time or
> the 'I' in this sentence. I don't know it." (42)

Regardless of the difficulties in Bernstein's views --- many of which are raised in "Write the Power: Orthography and Community," a chapter in Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1996) --- it is clear that Bernstein wants from poems something very specific: *not* a poem that re-presents "a mind thinking," but a poem that forces or seduces or asks --- one does wonder exactly which --- the reader to think, to witness her interpretive processes. Bernstein wants poems that resist the type of recognition Vendler wants and which she expresses with a line from Elizabeth Bishop's "Poem." Bernstein, it seems, wants poems very different from Bishop's.

The claim that Bernstein and Bishop do not share theoretical and aesthetic agendas seems so obvious --- a glance at their work will do --- that the evidence provided above seems almost unnecessary. The need to firmly establish the difference between Bishop's and Bernstein's use of the phrase "a mind thinking" is necessary, however, because that phrase is used in a recent project that attempts to

link the works of many major American poets, including Bishop and Bernstein. In *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), James Longenbach attempts to break down the "breakthrough narrative" of American poetry, a narrative that tells of American poets rejecting the constraints of modernism --- "easily characterized as traditional, impersonal, and hierarchical" (6) --- and assuming a radically "post-" modern project. Longenbach instead provides a more nuanced reading, showing that the "breakthrough narrative" is an illusionary critical construct, and arguing that postmodern poets should be understood instead as expanding and extending elements of modernism. Longenbach's goal, however, is not only to put an end to the use of the "breakthrough narrative" but also to heal divisions in American poetry; he writes, "As we look toward the future, a critical narrative that forces us to choose between Lowell and Bishop (or between Eliot and Crane) will only provide ammunition for the next inevitable backlash. So while it's true that, like most readers, I prefer certain poets to others, my goal is to offer an account of American poetry after modernism ... that allows us to choose from among a variety of poetic practices, not between them" (2). In his effort, though, to reconnect American poetry by correcting a critical construct, Longenbach creates a construct of his own; Longenbach creates a real value --- value that can be transferred from one instant of use to another --- for the phrase that conceives of a poem as a portrayal of "not a thought, but a mind thinking."

Although Longenbach argues against the notion that one form or meaning or project for poetry is better than another, he seems especially intrigued by and even privileges the poetry of "a mind thinking." The reason for Longenbach's interest in the idea of a poetry of "a mind thinking" is clear: such an idea allows him to connect the projects of seemingly different poets, for example, Bishop and Jarrell. He also draws together the poetry of Robert Pinsky, Jorie Graham, and, especially

problematically, Charles Bernstein. Of the poems in Pinsky's *History of My Heart* and *The Want Bone*, Longenbach states, "These poems retain the discursive clarity of the long poem, but their narratives seem, even within their smaller compass, more comprehensive and complex, more a dramatization of a mind thinking than the product of thought (to borrow the distinction

Elizabeth Bishop favored)" (149). About Graham, Longenbach states,

> Graham herself has admitted that Bishop's music does not set her off as Steven's or Berryman's does, and it's easy to imagine that Bishop would have found Graham's poetry far more unwieldy than Merrill's. But Graham has also emphasized that she feels a deep "temperamental affinity" with Bishop, an affinity that transcends stylistic decorum, and it's arguable that Graham, more than any other poet writing today, has realized Bishop's ideal notion of poetic movement: "not a thought, but a mind thinking." (175)

Immediately after this claim regarding the link between Graham's and Bishop's poetry, Longenbach mentions --- and, it must be noted, misrepresents --- Charles Bernstein as well, stating, "And while it's even easier to imagine that Bishop would have been bemused by the elaborate ambitions of the Language poets, Charles Bernstein has borrowed the same passages from Croll to underwrite his avantgarde project. As Bernstein describes it, his critique of 'contemporary forms' involves the attempt 'to portray not a thought, but a mind thinking'" (175).

That the point of this use of "a mind thinking" is the creation of a bond for postmodern American poetry after the fall of the "breakthrough narrative" is obvious; after linking Bishop, Graham, and Bernstein, Longenbach's penultimate paragraph discusses the significance of the "coincidence" of the use of the Croll quote by so many various poets: "The coincidence ... suggests that style never tells the whole story of American poetry: poets who seem, because of their formal choices, to have little to do with one another may share the deepest goals or ambivalence" (175). However, considering closely the numerous and various uses of Croll's thought, it is doubtful that there is inherent or deep meaning in the use of Croll's catchphrase. Considering that Bishop uses the phrase in different ways at different points in her poetic career and that Bernstein uses the phrase to begin a movement away from contemporary plain styles and then critiques his own understanding of the phrase to move away from it, it does not so much seem that "a mind thinking" is a stable signifier of anything "deep" but instead is a rather empty --- or too full --- signifier that is very easily appropriated for various purposes. Although he marshals other evidence to support

the fact that it seems as though many postmodern American poets to some extent value process, Longenbach uses the specific phrase, "a mind thinking," in large part to *create* a coincidence ---

neither Jarrell, Pinsky, nor Graham actually employed Croll's phrase --- to show that postmodern American poetry has something besides a faulty "breakthrough narrative" holding it together.

Longenbach also creates coincidence by simply excluding any evidence which might show that there are some different opinions about what constitutes "a mind thinking." Very often the poets Longenbach wants to link discuss thinking and/or thoughts in their work but these discussions are never mentioned. For example, in "Ode to Bill" (in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, New York: Penguin, 1972), John Ashbery, a poet discussed in Longenbach's book, writes,

> What is writing?
> Well, in my case, it's getting down on paper
> Not thoughts, exactly, but ideas, maybe:
> Ideas about thoughts. Thoughts is too grand a word.
> Ideas is better, though not precisely what I mean.
> Someday I'll explain. Not today though. (50)

Is this, as the poem itself seems to claim, a poem of something akin to thoughts, "ideas," and not a poem of "a mind thinking"? Or, with its digresslye, delaying strategies, does "Ode to Bill" portray "a mind thinking"? Even if a definitive answer to that question were possible, it must be noted that Ashbery's poem contrasts greatly with Graham's poem, "Thinking" (in *The Errancy*, New York: Ecco, 1997), which begins,

> I can't really remember now. The soundless foamed.
> A crow hung like a cough to a wire above me. There was a chill.
> I was a version of a crow, untitled as such, tightly feathered
> in the chafing air. Rain was expected. All around him air
> dilated, as if my steady glance on him, hindering at the glancecore
> where
> it held him tightest, swelled and sucked,
> while round that core, first a transition, granular --- then remembrance
> of things being
> seen --- remembrance as it thins-out into matter, almost listless ---
> then,

> sorrow --- if sorrow could be sterile --- and the rest fraying off in all
> the directions,
> variegated amnesias --- lawns, black panes, screens the daylight
> thralls into in search of well-edged things.... If I squint, he glints.
> (40)

Graham's poem presents and employs its occasionally errant thinking in an investigation, recording a phenomenological engagement between its inspecting speaker and its shifting, constructed subject; in its searching and groping, in its attempts to handle the many contours of perception, Graham's poem tries to do what Maurice Merleau-Ponty prescribes in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Trans. by Alphonso Lingus, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968): "We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible" (134). Not only does this seem vastly different from

the delay and play of Ashbery's poem, but it also seems vastly different from Bishop's and Hopkins's own presentations of the world's emblematic avatars. Graham's phenomenological "Thinking" does not work at all like the thinking in Bishop's "Sandpiper," which metaphorically equates the poem's subject with the poet but excludes any explicit involvement by the poet. Nor does it work like Hopkins's thinking, founded upon the belief that all things have a unique essence, an "inscape" guaranteed by God's authority, which allows him in "The Windhover" not to grope but to grasp, to begin confidently, "I caught this morning morning's minion."

While in some very abstract way, the work of Ashbery, Graham, Bishop, and Hopkins --- perhaps even Bernstein's verse-essays --- might all be works that "portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking," the concept of "mind" and "thinking" in each seems very different from the others. Looked at closely, "a mind thinking" becomes not so much that which joins all these poets as much as that which separates them. The fact that Longenbach fails to mention any of the details of the specific thought and/or thinking of the poets he covers allows one to ask: if the details of "a mind thinking" are not significant enough to be considered seriously, why should the phrase itself be enough to do the massive work of linking up some very different poets?

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For Longenbach's argument, the answer is simple: it is precisely the vagueness of the concept behind the catchphrase "a mind thinking" that allows Language poetry to be dealt with in a necessarily shorthand manner. While it seems strange that a book about modern American poetry after modernism largely excludes one of the major movements of postmodern American writing --- the sentence on Bernstein is one of the book's two sentences on Language poetry --- such an exclusion does not seem so odd when one considers the threat Language poetry makes to Longenbach's effort to unite American poetry. By simply suggesting that the practitioners of Language poetry --- referenced by the mention of Bernstein, their metonymic stand-in --- are congenial to the notion of the poem as the portrayal of "a mind thinking," Longenbach can make it seem as though Language poets would agree with his system; however, it seems as though Language poets are those who would most object to Longenbach's attempt to unite American poetry, for Language poetry is not constructed on a break with modernism as much as it is constructed on a break from other contemporary American poetry. As previously noted, Bernstein, for example, wants a contemporary poetry that moves beyond the plain style and goes so far as to compare "'common voice' poetry" unfavorably with "bestsellers" and "TV." Additionally, one must conclude that Bernstein, who dislikes Vendler's attempts to define "what 'all' poems do," would be equally displeased by Longenbach's effort to say that the seeming diversity of American poetry is actually illusory, that in fact all postmodern American poetry is similar because its seemingly various manifestations actually share "the deepest goals."

While it seems strange that a book which successfully debunks a problematic critical construct --- the "breakthrough narrative" --- does much to establish one of its own, this situation becomes, if not less contradictory, more understandable if one considers not so much the meaning as the use of these critical constructs. The "breakthrough narrative" is useful because it provides a way to value and to think about the value of the poetry written after modernism. For example, Bishop's work might be seen as valuable for the ways it breaks from Eliot's, its value coming largely from its agon --- illusory or not --- with its predecessor. Without the "breakthrough narrative" to give value to postmodern

American poetry, Longenbach has to establish another value for American poetry

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after modernism, and the value he proposes is that postmodern poems do the unique job of portraying "a mind thinking."

Longenbach's use of "a mind thinking," then is not only a critical description but also a promotion, a positive evaluation, of the poems he describes as portraying "a mind thinking." In fact, Longenbach occasionally lets into his text positive evaluations linked to the notion of "a mind thinking" as, for example, when he states that Pinsky's poems, when they approach the status of "a mind thinking," are "even in this smaller compass, more comprehensive and complex." Thus, Longenbach's use of "a mind thinking" is similar on one level to other poet-critics' use of the idea of the poem as a portrayal of thinking to positively evaluate poetic work. For example, in "The Shield of a Greeting: The Function of Irony in John Ashbery's Poetry" (in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), David Lehman, a proponent and second-wave member of the New York School, describes and promotes Ashbery's work, stating, "...Ashbery's poetry points to a new mimesis, with consciousness itself as the model; we are offered 'epistemological snapshots'...of a mind in motion..." (118). Additionally, on the back cover of C.K. Williams's *Selected Poems*, Edward Hirsch, a poet-critic of great generosity, promotes Williams's work by claiming, "No other contemporary poet...has given us a more textured or pressurized rendering of what it feels like to think --- to try to think --- through a situation or a mental problem moment by moment." That claiming a poet's work resembles the portrayal of "a mind thinking" has become the stuff of positive evaluations should not be surprising; in an age of skepticism regarding the totalizing systems of thought so popular mere decades ago --- Freudianism, Marxism, etc. --- the highest praise that critics can offer is not to link the poet's work with a definite, and definitely problematic, system of thought but instead to claim that in the work the mind is engaged in the action of moving through networks of systems in a process --- an often difficult, fragmented, elliptical process --- graciously called thinking.

While the late-Romantic methods of much twentieth-century American writing necessitate that the criticism written on it involve attention to how it makes use of the signs of process, the phrase becoming popular to refer to a poem that employs those methods is highly problematic. This is true especially in its most recent and

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most extensive use where "a mind thinking" is employed to suggest a common link binding American poetry because this phrase succeeds in its task only insofar as the various thinking minds' specific thoughts and thought processes are avoided and only to the extent that the phrase's eloquent flash diverts attention away from its lack of substance. Thus, what is otherwise an astutely critical book,

James Longenbach's *Modern Poetry After Modernism*, seems at times to be a somewhat carelessly --- or craftily --- constructed argument. Perhaps --- even though stylish high praise is often called for in this post-rational age --- in light of its ability to lead good, critical thought away from careful judgment, the seductive catch phrase that conceives of the poem as "not a thought, but a mind thinking" ought not to be used.

In the opening paragraph of "The Baroque Style in Prose," the essay that started all of this, Morris W. Croll notes and rejects the careless use of certain words, claiming that the way those words had been used made their meanings "perplexing and unphilosophical" and concluding, "Their use should not be extended" (207). Perhaps the same should now be said of Croll's own "a mind thinking."