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AGAINST THE CALENDAR: PAUL BLACKBURN'S JOURNALS

The biographical note prepared for the recent collection of Paul Blackburn's poetry is a chronological presentation of the major events of his life: born on November 24, 1926, in St. Albans, Vermont, he attended NYU and received his BA from the University of Wisconsin in 1950; he was awarded a Fulbright in 1954 and a Guggenheim in 1967; he published poetry and translations. Closure is provided in the respectful, declarative style of the genre: he died of cancer on September 13, 1971, in Cortland, New York. The biographical note fixes dates and places, as it were, in stone. But those of us who read Blackburn's serial poems, "The Selection of Heaven" or *The Journals*, attendant to the dates and places he provides, will be disappointed in our expectation of dramatic events or closure. In an autobiographical note, written for what was to become the posthumous publication of *Early Selected Y Mas*, Blackburn says of himself: "he is Mediterranean by adoption and lusts after French food, Greek wines, Spanish coñac, and Italian women. His tastes are broad and indelicate: he would gladly settle for Italian food, French wines, Spanish coñac and Greek women."[1] Instead of the dramatic event, a continental dinner for two is proposed; rather than closure, he offers the beginning of a permutation of eight elements (Spanish coñac, probably because it was cheap, appears to be a constant). The endless process of selection, not the progress of events on a calendar, defines the serial form of these poems, and when that selection is, as he says with a characteristic modesty, "broad and indelicate," the serial poem is all the more likely to defy closure.

In section 15 of "The Selection of Heaven," there is a rectangle, like a grave marker, in which Blackburn

1. Paul Blackburn, *Early Selected Y Mas* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1972), p. 130.

inscribes the deaths of his paternal grandparents: "Hannah died Mar 23, 1963/John Henry, April 17."[2] The mode of this lyric is elegiac, and the mood more consistently somber than usual in Blackburn's work. And yet, the event of death or meditation on the theme of death does not consume the form of the poem. Rather, the serial form of the poem enables its author to evade the almost fore-ordained resignation to death and its finality which is characteristic, for example, of Tennyson's sequence, *In Memoriam*. The serial form of the poem subsumes the closing of two lives and, as they say, a whole lot more.

The poem begins:

1. GOD, that it did happen,
that loose now, that
early configuration
of birds, the texture set in
words, 1945,
a Staten Island beach in early October
here in more than flesh and brick,
9th Street, March 1963.
(*CP* 246)

A correspondence of two places and two dates is established. The events are unnamed, but the point of contact is the "configuration of birds." In his Author's Note to *The Cities*, Blackburn claims, "Finally, it is a construct, out of my own isolations, eyes, ears, nose, and breath, my recognitions of those constructs not my own that I can live in."[3] The "it" here is both the volume of poems and the cities in which the poet has lived. "It" is not a sequence of events or meditations on a theme, but the observations (sensual) or recognitions (intellectual) of "constructs"--figures, forms. Acts of love and the event of death have their place in "The Selection of Heaven"; they are perhaps all-informing contexts of the poem. But their places are "set," just as "the texture" of this early configuration of birds is "set in words." Blackburn's note to *The Cities* claims that there are no events, no correspondences of years and seasons, which are not part of the construct of the poem. There is no content which, by process of selection and configuration, is not form.

The second section notes a correspondence among the materials with which the poet-translator works:

2. *The Collected Poems of Paul Blackburn*, ed. Edith Jarolim (New York: Persea Books, 1985), p. 258. All citations of Paul Blackburn's poetry are from this edition, abbreviated as *CP*.
3. Blackburn, *The Cities* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 12.

2. ROYAL EBONY
in the name of a carbon paper . Is
also title of a poem by Nicolás Guillén.

The smoke rises in a thread, a
curled stream from between
his thumb and forefinger
as he snuffs it out.
We live.
Pity? It
is the waste of their lives.
(*CP* 247)

Remarkably, neither narrative progression nor metaphoric comparison bind these lines; rather, they meet tangentially, as Guillén's title and the carbon paper which the translator uses meet in a name, a color. Every element in these lines, each sign, occurs in some permutation further along in this serial poem. The poem is a network, a construct in which signs (e.g. Ebony) exist in a contiguous relationship with other signs (Guillén's title) and a paradigmatic relationship with dissimilar but related signs elsewhere in the text. For instance: the sixth section, ASHARA, begins and ends with the phrase, "in Arabic it is the number 10 / Color is black" (*CP* 250). A black crow, a black cat, and "the black cypress spires," are joined to the number 10 by contiguous association. Whenever the number 10 is invoked, as in sections 10 and 14, things black reappear. In this paradigm, Guillén's title and the carbon paper related to crow and cypress. Contextually--as every metonymic "part" has its semantic "whole"--black is the obvious color of elegy.

There is no metonym in section 2 which does not have its correlative at some other point in the poem. While section 2 narrates no event, contains no metaphor, it initiates a complex network of motifs. Section 10, for example, presents a similar conjunction among the materials which the translator requires to get the job done:

10. IT EXISTS. There ↓
is the very spot to place the ashtray
so that my hand
may reach it without looking while I read
And that is where I place it,
exactly
THERE ↓

The 3
brandies I have had after lunch are
exactly

enuf
to create the vulnerability the
translator needs to bring him
open to the text, that other life
than his own
/
or how to share
another man's glory, exaltation,
love, penury, lust, 700
years agone, the gap gone,
No, not bridged, baby,
YOU ARE THERE!

(*CP* 254)

Translation, which seemed incidental in section 2, becomes the focus of the later section. The THERE's of the ashtray and the translator's transmigration of soul are an ironic conjunction. The exact placement of the ashtray, THERE, the packs of cigarettes methodically extinguished, metonymically represent the repeated and methodical revisions by which the THERE of the troubadour's exaltation is achieved. While the three brandies facilitate the process, it is the ironic conjunction of ashtray and exaltation--a metonymy, not a metaphor--which gives this section its structure.

The gesture of extinguishing the cigarette, first described in section 2, is repeated with slight variations at the close of section, 10, as well as in sections 14 and 16. It is a free motif which punctuates the poem as the poet-translator puts out one cigarette after another:

Smoke
rises in a thread from between his
thumb and middle finger as
he snuffs it out . continues .

(*CP* 255)

Such repetition is free from a rhetorical continuity which, as Barthes says, "will agree to repeat only if it can transform." This repeated gesture is not bound to any development of plot, character, or event, nor does it require any prior information to be understood. Rather, the free motif is indicative of a "fugal" continuity in which "identifiable fragments ceaselessly appear."[4] Such a motif, then, is characteristic of the "unbound" structure of the infinite serial poem. Each section of this serial poem is as disjunct and autonomous as the free motif. Since disjunct, the *significance* of the gesture changes with each *context* in

4. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (1964; Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1972), p. 181.

which it occurs: the relationship is, once again, contiguity. In 10, the cigarettes which the translator chain-smokes and methodically snuffs without looking are indicative of the laboriousness of his ceaseless revisions.[5] In contrast, the motif no longer signifies laboriousness when it recurs in section 16. The poet is smoking during the graveside services of his grandfather. The smoke rises and the ashes fall, leading metonymically to the phrase from the Catholic service, "ASHES TO ASHES" (*CP* 262). The snuffing of the cigarette, like the color black, signifies death. Habitual, ubiquitous, mundane--and like the taste, hot and bitter.

"Pity is hate," the poet conjectures in section 2--only to retract the statement. In 16, the poet concedes that John Henry's children could at least pity, if not love, a severe man who at last slipped into senility:

> John Henry survived Hannah twenty-five days,
> would wander about that section of the rest home
> peering into the empty room.
> "I can't seem to find my wife."
> They'd tell him his wife had died
> and he'd remember that for five minutes.
> (*CP* 258)

Bitterness remains, though Blackburn says of Hannah: "Everybody loved her" (*CP* 253). "The Selection of Heaven" is in the elegiac mode, but the ongoing process of the poem's serial form defies the finality of death. A similar formal tension occurs in an elegy for the novelist Robert Reardon, "Sixteen Sloppy Haiku" (*CP* 396). As the title suggests, it is a series of short poems which, nevertheless, defy closure. Referring to Reardon, the last section declares:

> He had a tendency to finish
> what he did
> cleanly,
> minus something
> Find it.
> (*CP* 400)

What is that something? The poet cannot deny the death of his friend, but he can offer an absolute defiance of closure in the poem that he fashions. The "final" line damns us to search for a something we cannot hope to find.

5. Compare Elizabeth Bishop's description of the cigarettes in the ashtray on her writing desk in "12 O'Clock News": "They are in hideously contorted positions, all dead. We can make out at least eight bodies." *Geography III* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 34.

"Elegy" to Propertius and Ovid meant a "lover's complaint." See how terms get away: a lover's complaint in Lower Manhattan sounds a good deal harsher. Federico García Lorca is a more recent model whose elegies display an obsession with the presentiments of death. In a stanza from "Song of the Small Dead Girl," translated here by Blackburn, Lorca laments:

> I found myself with the girl.
> Mortal meadow of earth.
> A small dead girl.[6]

But Blackburn's approach to the elegiac mode is a more exquisite blend of love (often enough, the procreative urge) and death, the lover's complaint and the graveside lament. This blend of Eros and Thanatos is most pronounced in *The Journals*--a blend of such fruits as these:

> Because I have left the door open
> there is always a matter of insects
> the wind in these high valleys blows
> in . I
> have to take a butterfly out in my hands before he
> batters himself to death against the
> glass pane
> between the livingroom & the kitchen .
>
> Then a wasp discovers the fruit bowl in the corner.
> He checks out the oranges and the mayonnaise-jar
> and settles on the bruised portion of a pear . O, yes!
> Lemons
> peaches
> a melon
> but returns to
> the bruised pear, its
> speckled skin, he
> hovers and sucks, he checks my outgoing mail,
> my empty pastis glass, the story now translated,
> even the lines of this notebook where he walks
>
> for a bit, but returns,
>
> makes love to the pear.
> (*CP* 539-40)

Blackburn presents this scene directly to the senses without comment. His craft is so clean--there are 3 or 4 adjectives employed--that I feel compelled to supply an adjective or two: so *gentle* with the butterfly which seeks to batter out its life; so *mellifluent*, as he follows the sucking wasp. One

6. *Lorca/Blackburn: Poems of Federico Lorca chosen and translated by Paul Blackburn* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1979), no pagination.

adjective that he does allow, however, is at the core of things: the wasp sucks at, "makes love to," the "bruised" portion of the pear, the one spot of decay. Blackburn, like the wasp, draws love out of death. In the only metaphor permitted, the procreative force draws life from death. At Julio Cortázar's house, in the hills of Saignon-par-Apt, August 1968, Blackburn presents a late pastoral elegy.

The wasp, "checking out" the fruit and other objects on the table with an apparently random intent, seems to me like Blackburn himself in action. Hovering over and touching upon the aspects of the *vita quotidiana*,[7] to quote his one Italian critic--the outgoing mail, the drink and the work just completed--Blackburn throws us a feint: what we take to be aleatory, there by chance, is rigorously selected and meticulously "placed" on the table--and in an instant, the poet as wasp returns to "where it's at." The immediacy, the *presence* which the demonstrative pronoun, "this notebook," signifies, is of course a device, an effect of the poet's chosen words. This entire episode, finally, is chosen from so many working days as a translator throughout Europe: *The Journals* are not an immediate, chronological "record" or "what happened" from 1968-1971 at all. *The Journals* are a series of discontinuous poems which, like a still-life of notepad, glass, and bowl of fruit, are "placed" or arranged according to the artists' sense of order, not the calendar's.

But elegy, yes--the moments of crisis are here too, though never excerpted, never allowed to become melodramatic events removed from the realm of the quotidian. The entry for December 13, 1968 begins casually, "A saturday-seeming sunlight in the front room." Blackburn observes:

> The black cats sit on the dirty couch and observe me reading,
> drinking my coffee, first of the day. They are waiting for me
> to feed them.
>
> (*CP* 561)

There is a kind of ellipsis in time; we do not hear the telephone ring--Blackburn shifts all at once into the past tense, to dramatic effect:

> I came back from the telephone and got into bed in the cold room.
> The covers were still warm. She was raised on her left elbow,
> looking at me. It wasn't fear, nor acceptance, nor anticipation.
> The cusp of necessity. I stroked her hair a few times and told her:

7. Annalisa Goldoni, "La Poesi di Paul Blackburn" in *Studi Americani* 15 (Roma: Edizoni di Storia e Letteratura, 1969), p. 384.

> "Your father is dead." Her hair is long & black & fine, her head
> rounded underneath it, under my stroking hand. It breaks, falls
> against my chest, my shoulder suddenly wet with tears. Sobs come
> openly from the throat, not choked back, neither opened to scream .
> I hold her hard against me, continue stroking. I wish she cd/
> scream . I wish I cd/ .
>
> ROAR
>
> The cats sit together on the bathmat near the door & observe me
> sitting on the pot . First of the day . They
> are waiting for me to feed them. I clean their box.
> In the front room, one sits in the single spot of sun on the floor, the
> other climbs the wooden louver, swings up to the top as the blind
> swings with her weight, rides it to the centersash . sits there.
>
> (*CP* 562)

Certainly, the attention paid to the cats and their scatological curiosity is a rupture of the traditional decorum of elegy, its serious tone and eschatalogical meditation. But the repeated stanzas, in which the cats observe a daily routine that must go on, bind death to the process of life. The melodramatic event--and there is a strident expression of grief here--is bound to the quotidian. In *The Journals*, as in "The Selection of Heaven," it is not the advance and arrival of the event of death which defines and controls the form but the network of motifs in their recurrence.

Blackburn continues:

> I hold her and she weeps for a long time. We are naked and
> alone in the world, lie there as one, and one and two, I hold her
> and we sleep . for an hour.
>
> "*Stone already knows the form*"

He quotes Michelangelo, "Stone already knows the form / of the statue within it" (*CP* 564); it is only for the artist to discover. This profession of immanence is critical to the poetry of process. The poet must recognize the form of an event, "those constructs not my own that I can live in." Even so, the statue is not discovered without the craft, the artisanship, of the sculptor.

> Warm & desolate under the blankets in a cold room
>
> in another man's house / in Annandale, New York
>
> somewhere in time
>
> sleep.
>
> Wake.

Telephone calls . when is the wake?
(*CP* 562-3)

Hypnos and Thanatos, Sleep and Death, nearly identical twins on a Mycenaean vase, remind us, as the pun on "wake" does, how very much death is a process of our lives, an event which cannot be estranged, nor separated from the flux and the repetition of the *vita quotidiana*.

The final section of "The Selection of Heaven" was written in 1967, four years after the composition of the first 16 sections. As with Robert Duncan's infinite series, *Passages*, it is entirely appropriate to the form of the poem to make additions at wide intervals, over the course of several volumes. Edith Jarolim, editor of the *Collected Poems*, claims that the section is thematically bound to the preceding 16 sections since it presents the "death of the poet's second marriage" (CP xxix). Of course, no such phrase occurs in section 17; Jarolim is "reading" the biographical note. What the section does present is a repetition of motifs from the earlier sections:

The dead man sits at the table
a dead cigarette in his mouth,
drinks, the mind-gears turn
repetitiously over the same materials,
the same images return, murderously.
(*CP* 263)

The structure of 17 and its connection to the earlier sections is found not so much in the contexts of love and death--nor the death of love--but in the relation of repeated metonymic details. An interesting physiological connection, like the synapse of a nerve ending, is described by the apparently injured speaker:

a right arm broken in two places, and
everytime there's a twinge in the interosteol musculature, the

pickup truck will return, with the
sound of glass smashing, with
hysterical vision of a wet rock
and a pink flower in the identical spot a week later .
(*CP* 265)

Each time the speaker feels the twinge in his arm, the pain triggers a reiteration of details associated with his marital separation (we must supply the context). This association is contiguous or syntagmatic--the twinge is not *similar* to the sound of glass smashing but *tangent* to it. The physical pain, while not a metaphor for divorce, is related paradigmatically to an emotional pain, his murderous impulse. Finally,

the poem contains in its last stanza one more repetition of the free motif:

> O, LOVE!
> Smoke
> rises from between the first and middle fingers of his left hand
> which came to life,
> so passive it was before .
>
> (*CP* 266)

The free motif, the repetition of metonymic details, and in effect, the primacy of the syntagmatic relation over context, event, or chronological narrative, assert the structure of the series, "The Selection of Heaven."

Edith Jarolim's arrangement of Blackburn's work in *The Collected Poems* is by the chronological order of composition. But very often the chronological order does not coincide with the numerical order given to the series. "Rituals I-XVII," for example, written over a span of nine years, sends the first section up to bat fourth in this volume; as a further complication, only eleven of the seventeen sections are extant--a series with lacunae. Clearly, Blackburn has something other than an autobiographical portrait in mind as the controlling structural device of these poems. The interesting effect for the reader who begins on page one and proceeds to the back cover is that he will read several of the serial poems out of numerical sequence. But since these poems are not *sequences*, the order in which they are read will make no difference. One does not need to have read Rituals I to understand Rituals II or IV which precede it; and if the poems were not numbered at all, one could not know that there were sections missing. As Robert Duncan says of *Passages*, there is no initiation and no terminus to the infinite series, and no bound sequence. Reading *The Collected Poems*, then, is empirical proof of the autonomy of the individual sections of the series.

The chronological ordering of poems (and this should be kept in mind when we come to *The Journals*) is finally more arbitrary than the assignment of Roman or Arabic numerals by the poet. What do the dates tell us about the form of the poem in *The Journals*? Or as Duncan says, "the series does not signify / beyond the incident of a numeration."[8] I would like to gauge the difference between the series and the sequence by reading Blackburn's four-part "Signals" in chronological order--that is, out of sequence.

8. Robert Duncan, *Ground Work: Before the War* (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 135.

"Signals I: Tanger, August 1956" is in two parts; essentially a pair of street scenes, not very pretty, like deuces in a poker game. In the first, people scramble to pick up "the empty cones of the ice-cream vendor/the gust had scattered" (*CP* 70). The revelation is in the lack of conflict where an American might expect to find one: "Even in Algeciras/that cesspool," the cones are a welcome windfall; the hot wind initiates a gentle scramble--not for ice-cream (how American!) but for the dry, empty cones. In 2, we have a contextual disjunction:

> Tonight,
> after 10 minutes watching
> and listening to early roosters
> a dog joining in from the street
> a lonesome ass
> screaming from the market
> for company
> or food
> one
> burst toward the Spanish coast
> It was orange.
>
> (*CP* 71)

What bursts? A flare, fireworks, a shell? It was orange. Part 2 is a series of observations related contiguously; these sights and sounds described without comment and without any effort to join the animal cries to the "burst." Only the lack of punctuation and the isolated "one" indicate a syntagmatic connection: we are to "read through," pivoting on an isolated word. It is difficult to tell how these two parts are "signals." What are their signifieds?

"Signals III," written and published in 1958, is the next to appear. Ironically, it is a "Spring poem" in a series with no motif of seasonal progression:

> Spring, being what it is this year,
>
> and it has been cold up to now
> and the heat later will be, my
> god, how shall we stand it?
>
> but after that storm Sunday, we
> have acquired several slug-
> gish flies. I
> am very tender with them.
>
> (*CP* 108)

This poem contains a rather nice, and deviously appropriate, example of anacoluthon--in classical rhetoric, "without sequence," or a failure follow." The poet's supposition as to what "the heat will be" is abandoned in favor of an

exclamation of dismay: "my/god, how shall we stand it." In a "failure" of rhetorical continuity, no finite verb completes the sentence for which "Spring" is the noun subject. This abandonment of a syntactical structure is quite common in spoken discourse, and Blackburn is quite attuned to the rhythms of everyday speech. Anacoluthon suggests a sluggishness and/or befuddlement on the part of the speaker--so both the speaker and the flies are similarly surprised by the spring heat. But this rhetorical device, though it betrays the laziness of the speaker, displays the craft of the poet. Instead of a syntactic completion, we have two autonomous clauses set side-by-side, paratactically. Not only does the anacoluthon establish the mood of the speaker, it also establishes at the level of sentence structure the a-periodic, a-sequential structure of the serial poem. I especially enjoy the ambiguous meaning of the final line. By "tender," does the poet mean a lazy, soft swat? Here the poet is neither the savior of the butterfly at Saignon (in *The Journals*), nor is he "murdering flies" as in the final section of "The Selection of Heaven."

"Signals II" was composed five to six years after "Signals III." "Signals I & II" appeared in *The Cities*, published by Grove Press in 1967, but the three poems have never appeared in sequence. "Signals II" concerns the break-up of the poet's relationship with . . . whom? It would be better to say that the poem engages in a mimetic fashion the break-up of a relationship through the break-up of a syntactic structure. We are so continually frustrated in our attempts to assign a poem to biographical events, or to compose a coherent biography from poetic statement, that we must finally admit that the referential function of language in poetry is subordinated to the relational (signs among themselves)--that is, to the very form of the poem:

Aside,
that you wd not come to me
that neither of us can, nor want to
share the other, nor can we help it,
I wd not come to you, either, nor
need I have
The gin and tonic begun or never drunk, I
shall sit here with my red wine and mull
I shall mull my red wine and think
I shall think
red gin . mulltonic . sitwine
red mullet, ginthink, miltown, drink
the atonic mulled red, bink, bink,
bink, bink, bink....

(*CP* 306)

Ostensibly, the disconsolate lover has made the mistake of following gin with red wine, mixing, or mulling them--in the homonym he fuses the act of drinking with that of repetitive consideration (the two words are etymologically related). As the poet becomes progressively more inebriated, syntactic combination virtually disappears leaving words or word particles to recombine in a free-associative manner: a small red fish, an Orwellian "ginthink," the tranquilizer "miltown" widely prescribed in the 1950s, and a tribute to "atonal" music. The speaker's last act before lapsing into unconsciousness is the ironically poetic "drink . . . bink" rhyme. The repetitive "bink," like the sound of a cardiac monitor recording the heartbeat of the unconscious patient, is the device in this series which is most clearly a "signal," not a "verbal icon."

Blackburn added a fourth "Signals" in 1967 as the third of the poem, "Paris-Toulouse Train"--that poem being part of *The Journals*. This intersection, or series-crossing, also occurs when "Rituals XVII. It Takes an Hour," which the poet writes on the bank's "Hispano-Olivetti" while waiting for a check to be cashed, appears in *The Journals* (*CP* 522). Robert Duncan's serial poems also intersect: "Passages 20" is also "Structure of Rime XXVI;" "Passages 36" is also No. 8 in "A Seventeenth Century Suite."[9] This may sound like the notational nattering of a conductor fussing over the score instead of listening to the music, but these intersections are in fact a positive proof of the autonomy of individual sections in the series; their a-hierarchical, a-chronological structure is capable of being read without prior narrative or thematic information.

In the train's restroom, the poet encounters the sign: *eau non potable,* which "has been carefully edited down to/ 'no pot' " (*CP* 490). An interesting aspect of this poem is that we have a sign, with both an official and an abbreviated message in French, which is almost, but not quite, effaced by another sign with two more subversive messages in English: in 1967, "no pot" might either refer to the unavailability of marijuana on French trains, or it might command that we not use the sink for a toilet. Thus, we have at least four signs in all, not one of which confidently achieves the process of signification--four "messages" that refuse to mean in any stable or fixed way. Who has done the "editing"? How can we assign a "determinate" meaning

9. See Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 68 and *Ground Work*, p. 80.

to "no pot"? Remarkably, Blackburn fashions a "poetic sign" from an act of vandalism; although he appears to be merely reporting, he arrives at a polysemic quality in this poem without resorting to a play on words.

"Signals" is, I think, one of the more interesting of Blackburn's short serial poems because the contexts of the four poems are so diverse and unrelated thematically. From line to line, Blackburn's materials fiercely resist a confident "this is one to take home" paraphrase. The train's conductor forbids him to play his tape recorder:

> There are
> sonsofbitches
> everywhere .
>
> Bonjour, monsieur Blackburn!
> Welcome back to Toulouse!
> and rain, I swear .

Clearly the invective and the curse upon the weather are the speaker's; but whose voice greets him in such an amiable, though formal, tone? Who gives the signal, and how do we read it?

The poetics of *The Journals* is elegantly stated in "ROADS":

> Thus qualified, I
> want to write a poem abt/ roads
> that they are there, that
> one travels them & is not obtuse
> nor obliged to take anymore in, onto the mind, than
> the body in time and space taketh unto itself, the
> mind in its holy vacuum
> breaking out of past the fact
> to other FACTS?
>
> (*CP* 484)

Blackburn's "elected analogue" for the form of *The Journals* is the "open road": form as proceeding. Literally, he is almost always "on/the road" in these poems, on the subway, the French or Spanish trains, in his VW camper--why not The *Travelogues* as a title for the record of wander-lust? Neither Coleridge's analogue for poetic form, the rooted plant, nor Duncan's analogue for *Passages*, the mobile, accommodate the motive of *The Journals*. These poems are centrifugal, always "breaking out of past the fact/to other FACTS" in an encompassing arc. No portentous metaphors or imposing schema force the poem to turn back on itself; instead, the force of the syntagm driving past one fact and on to the next results in a metonymic journey. We hear the echo in Blackburn of Olson's

statement in "Projective Verse:" "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception."[10] The poetry of process is opposed to the notion of progress, and in Blackburn, as in Duncan, we hear a denial of *telos*, closure, or climax--any "sense of an ending." Each arrival signals a new departure:

> so there's this road
> & one stays on it forever until one
> (it) stops (roads
> go on forever, so do parentheses) or
> gets some WHERE else in his body or his head,
> finds there's another place to be, comes
> or goes
> quietly to one side, & there
> lives
> or dies
> accident
> -ly .
>
> (*CP* 486)

The Journals, like these roads, could go on forever. But we are not on the interstate, trying to make time from one big city to the next. While *The Journals* proceed without closure, they are not as linear or continuous as the "long white line." Blackburn's poem is more like the "blue" highways, the county roads that wind 20 miles east, even though the sign reads north; they are often as broken and discontinuous as the dashes of white on a back road. It doesn't matter if we've been here before, if we got on in Cortland, NY, or Saignon-par-Apt; and we don't have to know where we've been to get where we're going-- there isn't any predetermined route.

The Journals, as a serial form, is centrifugal and infinite; but if the poem were linear and continuous it would have to contain nearly everything that took place in the last four years of Blackburn's life. We like to see Blackburn in the present tense, getting it down *right then*, until "The black cat comes over and stages a sit-in directly on the notebook/in which one is trying to write a poem" (*CP* 559). The illusion--and this is *craft*--is that the poem he is writing is *this* one. This "interruption" by the cat in need of attention is inserted between descriptions of an analogue which disturbs the idea of a continuous natural process in poetry:

10. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, 1973), p. 149.

> ... I'm dreaming of an absolutely natural hair, a single intricately curled, long, brown hair in a tiny plastic container you can see thru like a fuse, loose at both ends, beautifully involuted and fine. This is an absolutely indispensable item in a list of objects which must be collected, this wild hair in its artificial little glass tomb, carefully random, carefully natural. An absolute fake essential to the collection, essential for a correct life.
>
> (*CP* 559)

Blackburn addresses in his metaphor an essential conflict between the ideas of "organic form" (*right then* and inspired) and the precise selection which the poet must make (*poiein*, to make). Even in an open form, in the poetry of process, the artifice of the poet (represented here by the "artificial little glass tomb") must be imposed upon the natural, organic hair. One result of this "process of selection" is that, instead of a continual development of a single context (often the form of auto/biography or traditional narrative poetry), we have a series of contextual disjunctions. For example, the poet's "dream" of the encapsulated hair is followed by a careful description of "The Ft. Moultrie flag on a recent 6¢ stamp"; the cat stages its sit-in in the next stanza. Are these things "a list of objects which must be collected," an inventory of the desk-top? It is tempting to say that the process is aleatory, that something like the random collision of organic molecules has occurred. Blackburn's poem, however, is "carefully random": the poet intervenes to select only the "absolutely indispensable item."

The complexity of the infinite series comes not from the layering of metaphor (similarity and comparisons) but from the multiplicity of disjunct contexts. We have three metonymnic, "indispensable" items arranged continguously on the page: the hair in its capsule, the flag on its stamp, and the cat on the poet's notebook. Yet how do the contexts of these three items meet? Is there a complete disjunction or a point of tangency? We cannot even say that the items themselves meet contiguously on the desk, since the encapsulated hair has been "dreamt." Perhaps we must say that these items are "placed" together, if not on the desk, then in the poem alone. The infinite series proceeds metonymically, from item to item, and not by metaphoric comparisons. Blackburn concludes:

> And it doesn't stop. None of it
> stops, ever, it needs that wild hair in its
> plastic container, the essential image . So.

While this serial poem is a process without closure, it nevertheless requires the craft, the careful selection of the poet--anything and everything won't do.

Blackburn heads one Journal entry for August, 1969, "THEY ARE NOT THE SAME" (*CP* 588). A rebuke to those who think that all gulls (his favorite bird) look alike, this phrase is also the rebuke of the metonymic poet to the poets of metaphor. In his Prologue to *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, William Carlos Williams incites the revolt against "the coining of similes": "Much more keen is that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question."[11] Blackburn exhibits this ability for the most precise observation:

> The gull stands on the piling hits my eye between
> the locker shacks on the pier painted a dull identical
> tan, consecutively numbered, they are not the same, not
> by content or location of door, nor by width of board, nor
> how the corner joints are laid & nailed or finished.
> (*CP* 589)

The metonymic poet shuns the synthetic metaphor and the simile, which Williams claims depends on a "nearly vegetable coincidence"; what then is the virtue of this peculiar vision? Blackburn answers that one sees

> ... another sameness always changing, never quite
> identical . the same timelessness . it is not the same
> gull

The poet needs to see not generically or randomly, but carefully; he needs to see through the Heraclitan flux to the "peculiar perfection" of a thing, or in Blackburn's words, the "essential image." The payoff for precise observation is in the vision of the timelessness which the essential gist of an object offers. The poet of "Plaza Real with Palmtrees" (*CP* 50) can return to Barcelona ten years later and find, in "Plaza Real with Palm Trees: Second Take" (*CP* 493), that the apparently random movements of people and birds about the plaza can be made timeless through careful observation. The poet of process could write "Plaza Real" every day, a different poem. "Once again," he rejoices, "I am *looking* at it" (*CP* 496).

In the last entry of *The Journals*, Blackburn exclaims:

11. William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (1918; New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 18.

What a gas, maybe
Louie Armstrong & I
die, back to back,
cheek to cheek, maybe the same year. "O,
I CAN'T GIVE YOU
ANYTHING BUT LOVE,
Bay-aybee"
1926, Okeh a label then
black with gold print, was
one of my folks' favorite tunes, that year
that I was born . It is all still true
& Louie's gone down &
I, o momma, goin down that same road.
Damn fast .

(*CP* 677)

The physiological progression of Paul Blackburn's cancer is subverted by the very form of his poem. His infinite series not only denies closure but also rejects a linear and continuous development--any sense of a progression. These fourteen lines, written in the year of his death, refer to an event from the year of his birth, creating a neat circumscription of a life. But *The Journals* cannot be read as autobiography; rather than attempt to fit each poem into the context of a life, we must recognize that these poems are a series of indispensable items whose structure can only be understood by their syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Discontinuity obstructs the process of the poem and the resulting disjunction of contexts make it impossible to say that, referentially, "It is all still true." Such is the evidence that even in "form as proceeding," the form of the poem is a made thing. I think that Blackburn is being referentially, but not relationally, truthful when he says in his final line, "Bigod, I must have been full of shit."