

NOT WORDS ON A PAGE: An Affidavit
after David Meltzer (February 17, 1937—December 31, 2016)

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JANUARY 23, 2015, EARLY AFTERNOON: OAKLAND, CA

ROLL TAPE...

There's no video. It's just a microphone.

No, no. I'm just curious about the...

Oh, it's got a little dual stereo mic pair. And you could record video, but I'm not gonna...

That's good...

...unless you're planning on getting a hat...

...I'd have to go into make-up, or something.

...and doing magic tricks and stuff.

Oh, well, I used to do it...

Oh. Yeah?

Yeah. Well, when I was a kid.

*How do magic tricks play on the radio?*¹

Oh, well, this was at home. You'd get a kit and you'd try these things out. Actually at the time in New York, in Manhattan, there were these great magician shops, shops the magicians would go to, but then also just the general public for these little novelties and so forth. But you'd go into a place and if you knew your lineages you'd see, like, Cardini or one of these great people talking shop. The history of that kind of magic was very fascinating, so I became a scholar, you know, at 12 or something. Because it has to do with illusion and deception...

Misdirection...

...Misdirection—such a wonderful concept and so applicable on so many levels of daily reality and discourse. In fact the really revered magicians are not the illusionists, who require all this equipment, but those who do it with their hands, essentially. That's why that guy Ricky Jay..., I

¹ As a pre-teen, David was something of a wunderkind, intellectually (his IQ was through the roof) and musically (both of his parents were professional musicians), and he had a regular spot performing on *The Horn and Hardart Children's Hour*, a radio show something like to the Disney Channel of the day.

mean he's a real historian of this stuff and exemplary in terms of being a hand magician, with cards.... And they considered themselves to be much more of an aristocracy, because these guys in Las Vegas: David somebodyorother, who comes up...

With the pyrotechnics?

Yeah, the mechanical, relying on props and so forth. And someone like Jay would talk about how the real test is if you're just sitting around, as part of your act, you're sitting at the table, and people from the audience are there and they're right on top of you and to be able to pull off some of those card tricks—that's a huge challenge. It's very physical, you know, it's like an athletic event, because you have to be practicing...

Right, if your pinky locks up, the trick doesn't go so well.

Yeah, you're fucked. Fucking pinky....

* * *

That's more or less how it went, every time I ever spoke with David. General banter could go on and on and then suddenly shift into a miniature history lesson—always offered with humility and humor—the stray word or offhand remark as likely as any more pointed question to open a trapdoor into some realm one hardly imagined within his purview, but he seemed to know something about anything you could think of, and not just a name or anecdote, but something deeply researched or personally experienced, or both. Raconteur nonpareil, poet, publisher, professor, artist, musician, magician, and much more, I'm sure, David Meltzer was the most irrepressible scholar I've ever known. If something piqued his curiosity he'd chase it down the storm drain, through the sewers, up the spiral stairways of the Doe Library, and find himself atop some alpine peak, dripping the muck of his inquiry all over the otherwise pristine snow. And you didn't have to scratch and crawl your own way up the mountain to talk to him. He was happy to step right back down to your level, wherever you were. He wanted to know what *you* had to say, happy to take on an idea, an impression, any kind of information anywhere he could find it. I don't know how often I had anything to offer, but he always had his ears open, listening, ready to really hear me. Yes, this shall be a kind of encomium. Or is it panegyric? David would know the difference.

The last time I saw him, on 29 December 2016, he wasn't able to speak—a consequence of the stroke he'd suffered two days before. The visit was brief. I brought him a book I'd recently promised, a book of poems by a mutual friend of ours. As he was unable to hold it in his one functioning hand, I read him a page, then at his evident urging another, then a third, and he was moved to comment. With great effort he managed to say something about “my favorite poet...,” or perhaps it was “my favorite poem.” This phrase was all I could make out, but it was

clear that he was hearing the work, and that his mind was afire, his eyes full of light. It was also clear that of all the consequences of the stroke, it was not the paralyzation that bothered him, but the inability to respond to the poems, the inability simply to speak. I recalled hearing secondhand of a lecture he once gave after recovering from a severe and extended bout of laryngitis, how he spoke of that long forced silence having made him—he who had thought so deeply about the connections and disconnections between the oral and the literate aspects of language, of the poem, for much of his adult life—think about the voice in an entirely new way, giving him a renewed appreciation of speech upon its return to him, upon his return to it. I wanted to believe he'd return to it again, even after the stroke, but before the last dawn of the year, two days later, he was dead. I know what I miss, and I'm sure what many of us who knew him miss, most of all, is speaking with him, seeing where the conversation might go, what bon mot, what auto-historical tidbit, what hermetic mystery would unfurl from off his tongue.

The writings he has left us are voluminous. I won't even hazard a guess as to the cumulative page count of the published poetry, the 'agit-smut' as he called his novels, the introductions, interludes, and afterwords to his own edited anthologies and to others' books, the myriad interviews, the stray testaments, record reviews, newspaper columns. And the unpublished work—more poems, more prose, and notes for many lectures he gave at New College of California in the 1980s, '90s, and the early aughts. There's an incredible wealth of material there, well worth anyone's time, but one of the things that has struck me most consistently about so much of this work, as I've looked it all over again (and read much of it for the first time) these past two years, is its intentional, essential provisionality. Each piece is a gesture, an attempt, an essay, or a compilation, a series of such essays, attempts, and gestures. This goes for the poetry as much as for the prose. It's a bit disingenuous, really, to make that distinction. So much of David's "poetry" slips in and out of "prose" lines and blocks of varying size, and so much of the "prose" is comprised of such lines and blocks, these segments divided by bullets, stars, blank spaces. I was first and perhaps most continuously moved, in my now twenty-year encounter with David's work, by the Auerhahn Press pamphlet, *We All Have Something To Say To Each Other: Being an Essay Entitled Patchen and Four Poems* (1962), so I've been working in fits and starts at collecting David's "essays" and other "nonfiction prose" (for lack of better terms) for possible publication, and so I thought I'd use this occasion to write an essay about his essays, but it seems anything I might say about his "prose" might also be said about his "poetry," for no scholar was ever more true to the Confucian *Book of Rites*. David was never without his lute.

Music was at the heart of all his work, his writing often fugal and improvisatory – which is to say spontaneous, not to say without preparation. He harped on the deep musical knowledge and exhaustively practiced technique of the best jazz improvisors, whether in the Traditional, Swing, Bop, Modal, or Free Jazz idiom, insisting it was only from such a base that they could make their most avant leaps. He knew that music, as he knew magic, from his childhood in

New York when he drank 25-cent Cokes at Birdland, Bop City, and the Royal Roost, listening to Charlie Parker and the rest of the new music makers, and from his adolescence in Los Angeles hanging out on Central Avenue, listening to Wardell Gray and his compatriots, in the company of artists Robert “Baza” Alexander, Wallace Berman, George Herms, Cameron, and more. He knew the musical, as he knew the magical, art, and he well knew how to work in those modes himself. When he was a young man in San Francisco in the late 1950s and the Jazz-Poetry reading scene was still new and in vogue, he participated in a mode surpassing what seems now—and seemed to him then—the quaint, canned recitation of written words over background cocktail comping, the *modus operandi* of most poets on such occasions. You can hear some of his performance on a 1958 recording, released as *David Meltzer, Poet, with Jazz* in 2005. In a 1959 letter to the original producer, included in the CD liner notes, David described his way of collaborating with the musicians, as an actual part of the band on the bandstand, not just the bard on a stool out front:

The poems on this record were written especially for presentation & interaction with a jazz group. They were written in a tentative language that would, when the music began, improvise & alter & revise & invent new words in dialogue with the music’s sound & purpose. I’d bring a skeleton poem—a ‘head arrangement’ of words—& then would fill it in in performance, improvising in the same spirit as the players.

The poet has to reinvent his poem in the same way the horn-player invents his solo. I write the bare-bones poem before I recite [it] with the music; it’s like a lead-sheet. It’s an inside job, listening or reading.

Much of his published poetry seems to writhe with a similar spirit, even if it is more carefully edited and arranged. The 1959 pamphlet, *Ragas*, David’s second book (after the initial *Poems* (1957) with Donald Schenker), is so called after one kind of melodic framework used for extended improvisation in some Indian classical music.² The poems of the title sequence, selectively scattered among others not marked “Raga,” are relatively brief, certainly not extended improvisations in themselves, which suggests that David may have seen these poems as frameworks, too, spurs for possible elaboration. As the “lead-sheet” or “head arrangement” served as framework for live performance, so the “Raga” might have served as framework for the differently *timed* performances of his ongoing writing practice. David might have riffed endlessly on the changes laid out in any one of these poems, e.g. “23rd Raga / for Tina”:

² Ravi Shankar first performed in the United States in 1955, and his first album, *Three Ragas*, arrived the following year, beginning a period of increasing influence in US American music and culture. Toward the end of the 1950s, while Meltzer was writing his “Ragas,” Saint John Coltrane, too, was taking inspiration from the form, as he began to stretch his “sheets of sound” over similar frameworks, unfurling his own ecstatically long improvisational solos.

When I thought of you, my mind formed these things:

a newly minted coin depicting
a brace of dream birds
balling in mid air.
Behind them, a triad
of silver stars.

A pale lavender drape, bleached by time,
hanging behind an ancient window.
Outside, watching the street, a wooden Angel
carved inside the arch's wooden fusing.

The poem goes on for three times this many lines, relating only "some of the thoughts I formed / when I thought of you," so it easily might relate others. Then, too, these Ragas are linked. The next poem in the sequence, "24th Raga: The Birds," begins:

The dead robins I've seen
were distorted by the wheel.
Their bodies magnified by impact,
they died stunned.
Their beaks half open,
their wide dead eyes.

The birds in both poems are contorted erotically, the former in sex, the latter in death, and the eternal return of each of these to the other is not lost upon the poet. The shape of the wheel echoes the shape of the coin, and then the robins' "wide dead eyes" look back to the "15th Raga / for Bela Lugosi," whose "eyes become wide / &, for the moment, pure / white marble," when he says "Transylvania or wolfbane / or / I am Count Dracula," and the poet says, "It is no wonder (& not as a putdown either) that / you were so long a junkie," like John Wieners, dedicatee of the "12th Raga," which opens thus:

An overdose of beautiful words
keeps rushing inside my mind
but won't relate to thought or talk.
Like balloons, they will not last long
& insist on flying out of the hand
to die in the sky – released.

And so the round balloon takes us back to the wheel, to the coin, and we are back with the birds—as above, so below—with narcotics now joining the erotics of death and sex in that "triad / of silver stars." I imagine there's a "Raga" somewhere for his friend Philip Lamantia, too, whose *Ekstasis* and *Narcotica* both came out the same year—and one for Philip Whalen, and

Joanne Kyger, and any number of other poets, artists, musicians, and cult or pop culture figures. This book only offers seven of what must be a series of at least 24, if “The Birds” is the end of the cycle. Perhaps deep in the unprocessed archive at Berkeley’s Bancroft library they’re there. If anyone knows, do tell.

Much of David’s writing consists of such serial poems, extended poem sequences, sets, takes, deeply studied, considered and spontaneous elaborations on a theme, as a glance through any of his books will show. The first big one—i.e. “full-length” as the ridiculous industry jargon would have it—entitled *The Dark Continent* (1967), for instance, includes several: “The Golem Wheel,” the thirteen-pages of which are riddled with some two-dozen bullets; “The Clown” for Wallace Berman, the three individually titled parts of which are themselves comprised of multiple parts; a series of four multipart “Chthonic Fragments” for George Herms; and a series of seven “Lamentations”, the last of these for Jack Spicer, who no doubt offered, along with Robert Duncan, an introduction to the theory and practice of a serial poetics, when David was still relatively new to the city and joined a sort of poetry salon that met at Joe Dunn’s apartment with those disparate Berkeley Renaissance Magi at its head. Even among the score of seemingly stand-alone poems, a majority are comprised of several parts, like “Record Player” and “2 May 67,” each of which is riddled by seven bullets. Other books, some relatively brief, some quite long, are comprised of single sequences, like *Round the Poem Box: Rustic & Domestic Home Movies for Stan & Jane Brakhage* (1969), *Bark: A Polemic* (1973), *No Eyes: Lester Young* (2000), and *Beat Thing* (2004) to name a few. The beautifully Berman-wrapped *Hero/Lil* (1973) is comprised of two sequences, as the form of the title would suggest, but a prefatory note advises, “Both LIL & HERO are offered as starting-points to be added onto until, in time, these beloved demons can be reconciled &, as the tale goes, live happily ever after.” These two are one, riven, and incomplete. Indeed, Hero and Lil both have their precursors and appear as themselves earlier in David’s work, and they ride again after the binding of this book, presenting themselves, both baldly and masked, as in “Darn That Dream”:

Walking home
almost run-down
by a redhaired lady
(Lil, again?)
in her bright orange Triumph
too fast around
Overlook’s curves.

So many of his books are both books of fragments and fragments of books. *Asaph*, for instance, first appears as the final section of *Knots*, which David published in 1971 under his own Tree imprint, founded the previous year “as a context for an emerging body of work utilizing the creative potentials inherent in the Jewish mystical tradition.” Over the course of the decade

David published a catalog of two-dozen books along with the journal *Tree*³, “where Kabbalistic texts in new translations [were] placed beside the works of contemporary European and American authors and poets [in the hope] that this interaction of disciplines, histories and cultures [would provide] an intense and useful matrix for further exploration of Jewish mystical symbolism and theosophic concepts.”⁴ *Knots* includes sections relating to *Sefer Yetsira*, Golem, Tohu, and other such themes, all written with David’s characteristically indecorous joining of the colloquial, contemporary, and quotidian with the technical, historical, and esoteric, a swerving that brings Astarte and Abulafia, Buster Keaton and Marilyn Monroe together to “zip & zap thru tired ruins / tsimtsum debris, parking lots,” and “neon boulevards / crowded with teenagers more naked than Adam.” The titular “Venice” of the section from which I draw these lines is its own “dead echo,” the hotels of Venice, CA set in palimpsestic relief against the ghettos of Venice, Italy. As the poet writes, “music surrounds you, unties the mind.”

The final section of *Knots*, labelled “Notes For Asaph: A Work in Progress,” begins:

ASAPH (or Asaf or Asof) was David’s chief musician.

A cymbal player.

Play the cymbal

David, the symbols, poet

each breath a chance,

a change born of pulse.

“There are no closed systems in nature”

no sure thing

in music, the poem,

the ground we stand on constantly shifts.

We intone notes. Black dots on paper

guide our throats open, let out song,

sound tones of transforming noise.

³ A sequence of eight issues was originally planned, with each issue centered around a key theme in the Jewish mystical tradition: 1. ShMO: “In His Name”; 2. Yetsira: Formation; 3. Shekhinah; 4. Raa: Evil; 5. The Snake, The Apple; 6. Messiah; 7. Golem; 8. Angel. The first five issues appeared roughly annually, however, the sixth issue concerned with the Messiah would never fully appear, only its “1st installment,” a slim volume of the *Sayings of Yakov Frank*, in 1978. Jerome Rothenberg’s *Abulafia’s Circles* was published the following year in chapbook form by Membrane Press, with a Wallace Berman Verifax collage on the cover and a note at the top of the copyright page claiming, “This book is *Tree: 6: Beth: Messiah*,” but this note is misleading. Rothenberg’s poem was originally offered as a contribution to the issue, and would have appeared in the fourth of the five announced installments (1. Saying of Yakov Frank; 2. Midrashim, Parables and Paradoxes; 3. Messianic Texts and Tracts; 4. Re-working and Receiving; and 5. *MShYCh: An Inventory*, by Meltzer). These were to be issued “over a period of time depending on economic and artistic priorities” (*Tree Books prospectus*, 1978).

⁴ *Tree Books prospectus*, 1974.

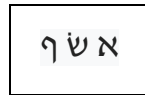
Further in, Asaph's cymbal "code" is transcribed by the "devout" as "'Praise HIM upon the well-tuned cymbals;'" to which the poem replies, "praise HER upon the harp," and four years later, Oyez published *Harps* (1975), in which a prefatory note informs the reader that "these pieces come from *Asaph*, a work in progress. It is a book that follows music as a central source of self-history." At the open, David writes: "Besides the angels who chose [the harp] for their music, a Marx brother played one well enough. Even my mother was once known to be a harpist," and a few pages in:

I am David her son.
Blind harpist
who sits upon a rock.
I hold a seven stringed harp
between my knees.
In the darkness sound makes light.
I follow.
To the end of mind.

Shortly after *Harps* appeared, Oyez issued *Boléro: A Section from Asaph, a Work-in-Progress*, and another eight years on, Black Sparrow published *The Name: Selected Poetry, 1973-1983* (1984), the fifth section of which is labelled *Asaph* and bears a note only slightly different from that in *Harps*: "*Asaph* is an ongoing work, a work-in-progress (or progressions), built of short and long poems using music as an autobiographic center." The first three (slightly edited) parts of the 1971 "Notes for *Asaph*" are followed by three parts dated 1982 and three more undated parts.⁵ Then comes the twelve-part "Darn That Dream" (1972), which is followed by the twelve parts of *Boléro* (1975), with the single-part, three-page poem, "The Red Shoes" (1981), closing out the section. *Harps*, which is perhaps my favorite book of David's poems, slim as it is, is not represented here—nor does it appear in *David's Copy: The Selected Poems of David Meltzer* (2005) published by Penguin, which reproduces the same selection from *The Name*, only slightly shortened and without any explicit marking of these poems as all part of one work, "ongoing" or otherwise. This exclusion is unfortunate, but for me it also frames a wanting similar to that framed by the missing "Ragas" discussed above. As I've been writing this piece, two linked questions have arisen: What other works, published or not, might have David conceived as part of *Asaph*? What so *qualifies* a work? These questions together threaten to overwhelm me at the moment, for it seems *Asaph* might not only overflow its title, but perhaps come to stand as a

⁵ There is an interesting discrepancy in dating here. This volume of *Selected Poems* announces the work as written between 1973 and 1983, but the period given on the intertitle page for this section is 1971-1982. *Tens*, Meltzer's first *Selected Poems*, was published in 1973, so that might explain it, except for the fact that that volume explicitly dates its material from 1961 to 1971. A more sober mind might dismiss this discrepancy as a mere copyediting error, but I'm inclined to make more of it, because it speaks to my sense of the (dis)continuity of the "ongoing work, [the] work-in-progress (or progression)."

sign for David's entire oeuvre, reaching back through those early "Ragas" to the earlier "head arrangements," and reaching out throughout both his published books and unpublished papers. Looking back just now through what remained in David's files at the time of his death⁶, I rediscover a sheaf labelled by hand:



NOTES

These Hebrew letters (the hand-written form approximated here in a typeface called, appropriately, "David," the default Hebraic script for my word-processor, it seems) read *Asaph*. These, then, are "Notes for Asaph" and they do include drafts of the few pages that appear under that title in *Knots*, as discussed above, but there are 75 pages in this sheaf. The first page seems a series of research notes about ancient Jewish music:

Sons of Asaph
Guild of singers
Hebrew music manifestation of Asian Semite culture
Aramic origin
The Sephardic melody had only 3 notes
Tonal system of ancient J music was founded either upon the
TETRACHORD (4 note scale originated in pharaonic Egypt)
– or –
PENTACHORD (HEPTACHORD)
a scale consisting of 5 or 7 intervals
&, eventually, the whole octave
OCTAVE (10)
Homophonic singing
Recitatives/liturgical chants/psalmody
Much ancient J music survived in sacred music of Yeminite, N African
& Persian J

Bach's ART OF FUGUE: 22

The last page is a portion of a draft of a poem entitled "Django," ending thus:

ALEPH TET GIMEL SAYIN
1 9 3 7

⁶ I had the privilege of helping to survey and prepare these papers for accession to his extant archive at the Bancroft. The entire archive remains unprocessed and therefore sadly inaccessible, but scans were made of many manuscripts from the posthumous accession, which included a wide range of materials from various points in David's life.

year of my birth, year of
Django's immergence,
a birth, into
the silent dark of
phonograph, the
dark eye makes
imagined movies against

In between there is all manner of poetry, reminiscences, lists, quotations, notes, gematria calculations, and drafts of those prefatory notes to *Harps* and the *Asaph* section of *The Name*. The lengthiest of these offers the following additional comments:

Proust's nose could capture odors and translate them into page after page of memory restored. Most of us know how a few notes of a record can put us in a time that record soundtracked. For instance, Bolero. It's only been this year that I've been able to hear that work as a marvelous musical construct, on its own terms, rather than as fuel for nostalgia. But Asaph, if it ever completes itself, wants to celebrate all the musics which have meaning in my life. "Good" or "bad" has nothing to do with music's mnemonic power. (For example, I compiled a list of random 45s for Larry Fagin which I titled Flop Hop, a guide to the best-of-the-worst, realizing that even bad records can transcend and perhaps, as I suggested, also have a Buddha-nature.)

My own life has never been far from real or recorded music.

This draft goes on a bit into more autobiographical detail, but another draft cuts most of that, and the shortest keeps only an alternate phrasing of the central sentence of the above: "If it's ever done, I want it to celebrate or annotate all the musics which have meaning in my life." *All the musics...*

As I've been working on this piece, it has been curious to me that David's various descriptions of *Asaph* make no mention at all of the Jewish mystical tradition so fundamental to its originary "Notes." Such references are laced throughout "Darn That Dream," where "Jack craves / a magus room / lettered in fire," and "Joseph in his process / [wears] spectrum as amulet," and we find diverse "kabbalastica / Dylanogos" here; and in *Harps*, where it is said:

King David played the spheres.
His harp had 10 strings & that was enough.
He plucked the tree.
Wrote songs his harp accompanied & Asaph, his rhythm
section, played cymbals in a subtle fashion.

But in *Boléro* and *The Red Shoes*, the other identified, published parts of *Asaph*, such references are rare and generally oblique, if they're there at all. It seems to me then that many, many poems appearing in various books fit the bill, and it seems easy enough to argue for the

inclusion of the aforementioned book, *No Eyes: Lester Young*, which is a “prolonged meditation on the last year of Lester Young’s life..., inspired by a newspaper photo in the Sunday *New York Time Book Review* section in the early ‘60s..., [which David] carried with [him] for decades..., [its] yellowed & wrinkled newsprint stock giving it a talismanic aura,” as the poet wrote in a prefatory note.⁷ The mystical here isn’t explicit, only implied in the music, but it’s baldly manifest in *Beat Thing*, where many Berman images emblazoned with Hebrew letters flash beside the 150-pages of what is arguably David’s magnum opus, where “unstoppable Golems clunk up San Francisco hills” (35) and “wind up weeping to worn 10” Pete Seeger LP / driven by unstandard time heart waver voice or / at Black Hawk with the Halseys waiting for Monk’s set” (37) in the terrible shade of the Holocaust, the Hydrogen bomb, and the hierarchies of the politico-economic structures of midcentury USAmerican life: McCarthy, Jim Crow, consumerism, dope, Bebop, and Pop Culture. (There’s some terrific stuff here too, of course. It isn’t all doom and gloom. David takes the good with the bad, and takes both seriously, supplementing his experience with research, and vice versa.) And then there’s *Rock Tao* (1965), David’s just-shy-of-published⁸ auto-critical mash-up of popular song lyrics, quotes from disc jockeys, radio evangelists, advertisers, and other voices broadcast via radio, with print sources ranging from fan magazines to Mircea Eliade, from Wallace Stevens to Socrates (as quoted in the Dear Abby newspaper column, naturally). This too seems to fall under the purview of *Asaph*.

I am strongly tempted to go on, to turn this already ungainly piece into an exhaustively annotated catalog of David’s work, of David’s life. Both. In his biographical note in the seminal anthology, *The New American Poetry* (1960), to which David was the second-youngest contributor (by a matter of a few months), he did write, “Poetry is NOT my life. It is an essential PART of my life.” Fair enough, but where one draws the line between the poetry and the life is as difficult a question as where one delimits *Asaph*. Neither question is going to be resolved here. Perhaps neither is resolvable. David’s death only further complicates the matter. Both matters. Were he here, perhaps he could pronounce upon them, but we have lost that opportunity, and we are surely the poorer for it.⁹ The following words, which David wrote in

⁷ If the point needs more arguing, there’s this quote from Charlie Parker among the 75-page “Asaph Notes” discussed above: “I was crazy about Lester. He played so clean & beautiful. But I wasn’t influenced by Lester. Our ideas ran differently.”

⁸ A section of this work appears in this *Dispatches* folio. See the editor’s note.

⁹ When he died, we had been talking about a series of interviews in which I would plug him with questions and prod him with comments in an effort to suss out the story of his life. He was resistant to writing memoir or autobiography as such, despite the central role of personal memory and autobiographical resonance in his writing, but he was as generous a storyteller as any I’ve had the privilege to hear.

his introduction to *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah*, might stand as well for how I see his own work:

Much of what is of utmost significance in the Kabbalistic tradition never approaches the page. The oral transmission of Kabbalistic mysteries remains a series of moments between a master and his disciples, moments that transcend the limits of written language.

Many of the selections included in this book were not written to serve the continuity of a literary tradition; instead, they take the form of notes for the actual teaching which takes shape only in the context of a sharing-of-breath experience between teacher and student. With few exceptions these texts remain as the aftermath of the actual teaching—they are shadows, ghosts. (xiii)

David's texts, too, are ghosts, for me, now. I can hear his voice in any given line; he masterfully encoded his breath in the black fire of the letters on the page, but no craft could encode his actual presence in the white fire of the page itself. When the maestro was there, in the flesh, the silences were resonant, the white spaces blooming with the possibility of sharing, or shaping together a common understanding of the moment we were in. As David wrote in "Patchen":

The spiritual quest cannot be white made black with letters.
Your questions are not words on a page.
Your answers are not words on a page.

The spiritual quest, which poetry is, as much as any contemplative practice, is simultaneously singular and collaborative. We follow others, lead others, walk alongside others. Spicer spoke of the "gait" of a poem as being affected by, and therefor affecting, the gait of the poet as he walked the city in which he wrote. San Francisco's and Vancouver's streets impact the hips differently and so impact the poem, he insisted, supplementing Charles Olson's famous alarum over the poet's breath. David would agree, I think, with the idea that one's breath and one's gait are also affected by, and therefor affect, those of the others beside whom one walks, the others with whom one speaks. The poem, whatever form it may take on the page, is characterized by an invitation to participate in its realization, as others have said, and yet it remains ever in potentia, resisting any final interpretation by sheer dint of its continued existence, its continued availability to reading.

With Baza, David noted "the sacral way Wallace [Berman] gave somebody a book to read":

No explanation; it was enough that he had divined something in it for you to discover....
Reading the book became a ritual event to release (and realize) the buried mysteries of the text....

Perhaps, in retrospect, what Wallace obliquely taught me was the mystery of reading. I read the novels, poetry collections, occult books, art books, Wallace gave me

like I later found out kabbalists enacted their rite of reading, grounded in the faith of discovery. Intuitional, improvisational, flexible and in continual flux; allowing a word or phrase to bridge out and into a lit-up network of connections and associations.”¹⁰

I’ve the sense that this idea was central to David’s understanding of his relation to his own writing as well—that he was a reader of it, as much as he was the writer. He returned again and again to key texts, key tropes, key figures, key moments in his life, key images, key words—but key to what? There was no lock save that continually cast in the continued writing. With every elucidation, there was in inherent occlusion. The mysteries he pursued, pursued him in turn.

His ouroboros was an unusual animal, not easily described as a snake or dragon, figures readily recognizable to almost anyone. David and his work were *sui generis*. Whenever I speak to someone unfamiliar with him, I find myself saying something about him being a poet, and also a scholar of jazz and of the kabbalah—and other things, too, as invited by the context, but these three things, invariably, and almost invariably in this order. I say this as if these three things were separate from one another, somehow, but what any of us who *is* familiar with him knows, is that they are intimately twined in David’s work and person. What I am ultimately trying to highlight here is the likeness of the “head arrangements” and “Ragas,” which I have argued establish the *modus operandi* of all his work, to those texts he gathers in *The Secret Garden*, in that they are all “notes for the actual” work, “which takes shape only in the context of a sharing-of-breath experience.” In the liner notes to that aforementioned 1958 recording, David writes that “the audience is the other part of the moment and the improvisation. It’s full-circle in reception and recognition.” On stage, as in the classroom, as in the living room, there is need of “a sharing-of-breath” to realize the text, but what we have left are “words on a page,” and so in an attempt to at least provisionally close these remarks, and perhaps to propose the terms for some future effort, I will turn to *Death: An Anthology of Ancient Texts, Songs, Prayers and Stories* (1984), in the introduction to which David writes:

A curious business, making a book out of words found in other books. A continuum that’s hard to conclude. The beginning leads to no known end; book leads into book and what is at once revealed becomes just as easily concealed. Anthologies put together by poets are inevitably poems and are constructed like poems.

I let the words speak to me and for me. An elegant dummy, I open a masked face, a hinged mouth, to tell of death from a script pieced together like a quilt.

Death can only be imagined.

¹⁰ From *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art/Amsterdam, 1992.

I'm imagining death out of words affecting me most directly. Even at the beginning of this undertaking, I understood that my limitations are what my work celebrates, explores, and defines.

I want to go on, and perhaps will in time, to celebrate and explore, though perhaps not define, the place of David's editorial work in my exploding sense of *Asaph*¹¹; and to discuss other "unfinished" work, like the *Rabbi's Dream Book*¹², which may or may not be what he often but enigmatically referred to as the "Alphabet Book"; and to delve much more into David's thirty years and more of teaching, at New College and beyond its walls—but I've run up against my own present limitations, and so I must pause. Not finish. If David has taught us anything, it is that the work is never finished.

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Nicholas James Whittington
February – March MMXIX

¹¹ David's pair of anthologies, *Reading Jazz* (1993) and *Writing Jazz* (1999), with their major autocritical introductions, interludes, and afterwords, are the immediately obvious nominees, but I would argue further for the inclusion of *The Secret Garden*, an outgrowth of his editorship of *Tree*, the pancultural *Death* and its precursor, *Birth*. Then there are the magazines, *Tree*, as mentioned above, and *Shuffle Boil: A Magazine of Poets and Music*, co-edited with Steve Dickison, which ran four single issues from winter 2002 through fall 2003, with a double issue following in 2006. In 2016, at my behest, Meltzer and Dickison guest-edited *AMERARCANA: A Bird & Beckett Review*, reviving their magazine for one last issue before David's death.

¹² A portion appears in this folio. See editor's note.