Self-Reference and the Language About New Music

Susan Parenti

(1985)

Contents

INTRODUCTION 2

PART ONE: SPEAKING ABOUT SELF-REFERENCE 5

Conversation One: in which A, B, and C discuss self-reference as an attempt to refer to self. 5

Conversation Two: in which A, B, and C discuss self-reference as an attempt to refer to self’s language. 7

Sleuthing the Language: Workbook 8

Lecture 8

Dialogue One between Ergo and Evertheless 11

Dialogue Two between Ergo and Evertheless 12

Conversation Three: in which a self-referential composition is examined. 15

Conversation Four: in which self-reference is connected with listening to new music. 17

PART TWO: PROCEEDING SELF-REFERENTIALLY 20

Introduction to Self-Referential Rehearsals 20

Rehearsal One 23

Rehearsal Two 24

Rehearsal Three 25

Rehearsal Four 26

Rehearsal Five 27

Rehearsal Six 30

Partial Bibliography 34
INTRODUCTION

Problems—Solutions

That a society has dilemmas, is no news. It may produce news, however, were one to examine the society’s turn to solutions of those dilemmas: to examine the currency given to certain solutions, the popularity of some solutions and the unpopularity of others, their rise in favor and their fall from it, and how a society may become exasperated not only with its problems, but also, with its proffered solutions.

I observe two main ways in which a society proceeds in the face of dilemmas: the first Path is to proceed along well-known routes that link a problem with its most likely solution. In the absence of an analysis urging invented solutions, a society may simultaneously describe a problem and some existent solution (“I don’t work hard enough—I should work harder”; “I’m disorganized—I should become more organized”; “We waste things—we should be more economical”; etc.).

The second Path is to pass one’s hand along the route that links problems and anticipated solutions, and then to turn back on the route, and to turn back on one’s hand, and to scrutinize in the dust left on one’s finger that link between problem and solution. In this way one might become aware that the solutions which nominate themselves along with the naming of the problem might be part of the problem; that while every problem hints at its proper solution, and would set us busily and obediently on the path seeking it, that perhaps in the hint, and in the propriety, and in the obedience, the problem is perpetuated, not solved; that perhaps the Ten Commandments were the sin, and not the people’s inability to follow them; and that perhaps in the rose lies a worm, or—in a worm, the rose.

The second Path, more seductive, occurs at the moment of exasperation of a society: when the desperation with the failure of the hinted-at-solutions to end the problems, or desperation with the boredom incumbent in executing these well-known solutions, makes a society not only alienate itself from investing, yet again, in those available solutions which parasitically attach themselves to problems, but also begin to scrutinize its own mechanisms of problem-solving.

It is in a spirit of oddly tweaked and strangely raised eyebrow, that I turn to the phenomenology of language. In this century, the reputation of language has been radically altered:

Every century gets hold of at least one good idea to direct the way things are to be understood. In our own time, such an idea is that the instruments through which we see the world and the symbols in which we think are not neutral conveyances but active participants in how we see and what we think. This is what the philosopher Wittgenstein meant when he said that language is not only the vehicle of thought but also the driver. This is what the physicist Heisenberg meant when he said that we see nature only through the questions we put to it. And this is what the psychologist Adelbert Ames meant when he said we see things not as they are but as we are.


The work of Whorf, Wittgenstein, Chomsky, and others tells us that language can no longer be considered as it has been considered for centuries: as mere blank medium for thought. Rather, language is a medium that has designs and purposes of its own, which it has learned from paradigms, and which enable it to orient, to direct, even to produce thought. Axioms such as “Don’t just talk, do something” and “Actions speak louder than words”—which attribute to action the ability to have far greater effect on human affairs than has language—no longer hold: language must be put on the stage of the great actors. Language is to be held responsible.

The change of reputation of language has consequences. Our discussion of problems implies a picture in which we have problems and solutions, and, consistent with Path One, we simply pass our hand between the problem and its potential solution:

If now we take language into account, the picture changes. Now we have not only a “P” and an “S”, we also have language about the problem and language about the solution:

In the spirit of Path Two, we might scrutinize the above picture and ask: might the solution, and the language about the solution, be part of the problem? Might the path between problem and solution have to turn on its own language before we can arrive at a solution outside the domain of the problem? Might the language we summon to our aid in discussing problems and solutions be part of the problem?

Thus mighted, we draw another picture:
in which, yes, the problem-solver investigates language in order to generate solutions that do not perpetuate problems.

**Self-Reference**

With the above descriptions and drawings in mind, we arrive at the door of self-reference. Self-reference is asked to enter the room in the midst of the great clamor, the great scandal that language can no longer keep the reputation it has kept. The notion of “self-reference”, first introduced in a biological context, was understood as indicating the balance between the parts of a system: imagine that the system is stable when all its parts act together to either maintain or restore a balance between its parts: this interaction is called the “self-reference” of a system. In a non-biological context, self-reference refers to a particular dynamic process where something which had been making a distinction in one direction, now turns on itself and makes itself the object of its distinguishing.

If \( \neg \) is the sign for “making a distinction”, then \( \neg \neg \) is the sign for a distinction made which then becomes the object of its own distinguishing.

In the above investigation of whether the language of problems and solutions may be contributing to the problems, the sketch of a problem-solver turning on her problem-solving language showed a self-referential process:

![Problem-Solver Diagram](image)

This above investigation needs must proceed self-referentially: language would interact with itself, turn on itself, with the result being a description of the descriptions.

An example of a self-referential statement:

> For years I’ve tried to boast and brag, but never quite made it. — Is this the first time?

This statement talks about something while doing it—it boasts the inability to boast—and then points back on this phenomenon.

Self-reference, in this article then, will refer to a linguistic activity of language “calling” itself, “turning” on itself (and “turning on” itself). I take as point of departure those new understandings of language that have contributed to language’s revolutionary change of reputation:

1. the closure of language, i.e., that language will and must function to maintain itself, and that in the process of a describer using language to talk about an “it”, the capabilities of the language used will determine what can be said about that “it”; and

2. the paradigmatic conditioning of language, i.e., that these capabilities of language were produced by, and reproduce paradigms—both those concepts we now recognize as paradigms, and those hidden concepts yet to be named paradigms.

**Self-Reference and the Language About New Music**

My purpose in this article is to investigate the phenomenon of self-reference: in particular, to examine what happens when self-reference is applied to a problematic area, the language about new music. I will look at new music through the language spoken about it: not considering new music a problem; rather, considering the presence of new music as raising the dust of problems.

There exists a relationship between a crisis in the language about music, and a crisis in the relations between new music and the audience. It is due to the music, some say, that we can’t talk about it; it is due to the language about music, others say, that we can’t talk about it. I turn to self-reference in order to investigate this language about music: the closure of language and its paradigmatic conditioning are such that when this language is used to describe new music, it measures the music according to outmoded standards and concepts, thereby preventing the listener from being able to register the music. Under the influence of powerful paradigms and concepts, our language has become the syntactical agent who, in the name of truth, the real world, shared knowledge and opinion, speaks about and measures the music; while the language that would, in the name of the music, speak about and measure the world, truth, and knowledge, remains undeveloped and neglected. So strong is the power of language to speak for itself and about what it describes that new music is helpless against that power: music cannot speak for itself (never mind the popular opinion); and, in a social world, things are what is said about them. The meeting of present-day language with new music is a situation which is disastrous for the music: language, when let loose on new music, not only prevents listeners from hearing the music; it also slanders the music the listeners were trying to perceive.

Only language is strong enough to measure language; only language is able to counteract language. Thus we are under the command of an imperative: language must be made to examine itself when in the presence of new music. If language is the standard against which new music is measured, then
that standard must be measured.

My thesis is that the contempt for self-reference prevents language from bridging the gap between audience and new music. Until language is forced to take a self-referential stance—i.e., is taught to measure and examine itself for all traces of concepts it unknowingly supports and all consistencies it unknowingly carries—until then, I propose, will language speak as an agent against, and not in the name of, the music it attempts to describe.

The Method of This Article

The method of this article is to examine self-reference under situations of dialogue. I found that self-reference, which is a dialogue-within-monologue, already pointed its critical index finger at possible modes of my presenting the subject. The narrative “we” and “sentences-minus-I” of scholarly style were out—they invited a non-self-referential treatment of self-reference. I had to at least make attempts to do the thing I was speaking about. Therefore I have, with much relief, composed situations which witness my describing: in dialogue I could create witnesses (sometimes arguing, sometimes agreeing, sometimes off-the-point, all moody), and via these friendly aliens, I could turn on my own language. The Famous Last Word, horror of the scholarly paper writer, was to be prevented, or at least interrupted, as Famous Last Words were bounced from character to belligerent character.

In the following dialogues I make use of the as-yet unfixed status and ambiguous significance of self-reference as it enters the domain of our present intellectual community. Part One, called “Speaking About Self-Reference”, contains four conversations in which I float the subject of self-reference: I bring up contexts from which self-reference might have arisen; I make sometimes wild and sometimes tame connections between it and other processes, subjects, problems. Between “Conversation 2” and “Conversation 3” I inserted a lecture with two dialogues: “Sleuthing the Language”. This insert is of some length, because I claim there is a great need for readers to know what is meant by “turning” on the language (“turning on” the language)—so I demonstrate this process and the problems and questions which surround it.

And where is new music in all this? The language about new music is the background against which this drama about self-reference is played out (New Music itself, as always, sulks in the foreground). The conversations use what’s said about new music as a point of reference and self-reference. In Part Two, “Proceeding Self-Referentially”, the article ends in that most abstract of real situations: in the rehearsals of a piece of new music (Study for the Performers’ Workshop Ensemble, by Lesley Olson) wherein, while the music is rehearsed, self-reference is played.
PART ONE: SPEAKING ABOUT SELF-REFERENCE

Conversation One: in which A, B, and C discuss self-reference as an attempt to refer to self.

(A walks into the room. B is already present.)
B: . . . something.
A: What? In the article I gave you to read, Francisco Varela talks about a shift in paradigm from the old objectivity-oriented notions, to the new notion that a description shall reveal the properties of the observer. Now what I’ve got to say is this—
B: You assume I know what you’re talking about.
A: What? In the article I gave you to read, Francisco Varela talks about a shift in paradigm from the old objectivity-oriented notions, to the new notion that a description shall reveal the properties of the observer. Now what I’ve got to say is this—
B: You assume I know what you’re talking about.
A: Oh. Self-reference, of course.
B: . . . explain everything.
A: Do I have to go back and explain everything?
C: (settles herself comfortably in the chair.) Who is Varela and what is closure?
A: Yes. I was saying that self-reference enters the room when— (C enters the room.)
B: What was the context of the Varela remark?
A: Oh, I don’t remember the context exactly. Must I? Ach. Well, alright, I suppose I can remember. He was describing the closure of the nervous system, and—
C: (blinks) What’s that got to do with it? Or, oh, I see, you mean it symbolically, in that—
B: (guffaws) Pay attention, this is for your benefit, remember.
A: The new notion arose when Humberto Maturana stated that cognition is a subject-dependent phenomenon.
C: So Notion Two implies that people invent reality? This idea has always troubled me. On the one hand, as an artist, I think people do invent their own reality—
A: No, no—let’s not go into that direction. To continue—
C: Yes but it puzzles me, it puzzles me! (bangs on the table.) You’ve talked long enough, by the way. Shall the piccolo always peep? Let us have a change of instrumentation. (to B) What do you think about this? Is reality only an invention of each of us?
B: I’m here.
C: (blinks) What’s that got to do with it? Or, oh, I see, you mean it symbolically, in that—
B: No, I said that because I like to be one of the few who do give answers.
C: Oh, now, that isn’t satisfactory at all, now really, I—
B: Let us return to the subject. I know, A, that you were just about to bring in your main point; however, let us for a moment go about it in a different way. Assume there are three worlds, of which the third is not yet known. The first is a world of observations of what is the case, such that if we die or fall asleep or don’t look, they are still the case. This is the hierarchy of objectivity. Then there is that same structural world of things which are the case, but now the world applies to me. This is the
hierarchy of subjectivity. In the first, the “I” is the consequence (of things that are); in the second, the “I” is the premise (of things that are). Now, for next week, describe to me the third world. Meeting adjourned.

A: Meeting adjourned? Why? No, now—I can tell you now, not next week... It’s difficult to find the words, so bear with me, friends. (B and C brace themselves.)

A: The third world I would call the self-referential one. Understand, C, that the goal of self-reference, as I’m describing it, is to find the self—or, as I like to put it, to find the lost found self.

C: The lost found self.

A: The third world comes about in the attempt to make a consistency between the two seemingly competing statements of a closure: the first being, as you may remember, that a description always reveals the properties of the describer’s language; and the second, that a description reveals the properties of the describer. I say that the first statement is unfortunately true, while the second statement wants to become true. For me, then, self-reference is the attempt to make true Varela’s statement, that a description reveals the properties of the describer.

C: And how do you make it true?

A: Given that a description always reveals the properties of a describer’s language, and also given the desire that a description reveal the properties of the describer, the way the describer tries to get a profile of self is to turn on her descriptions of the world she sees. This moment of turning on one’s descriptions is a moment of self-reference: it’s a way to momentarily get a profile of self in the closed circularity between describer, descriptions, and described.

C: Aha! So you are involving language in self-reference!

B: We speak here not just about the existential “I”, but also about the reflective “I”.

C: Pomposity. A had said “to find the lost found self”—A said that self-reference is about the self. Now, my point is: to whom or to what does the word “self” in self-reference refer? To the person, or language, or what?

B: Yes.

C: Oh no you don’t! You can’t get away with that!

B: Self-reference wants to bolster Maturana’s statement that cognition and cognitive statements are subject-dependent phenomena. With self-reference one checks one’s statement—to what degree does it show I’ve said it, to what degree has it said it? The intent being for the statement “I” makes to be measured by the “I”, not by the “It”.

A: You bring in measurement, the notion of measuring, because in both the objective and subjective hierarchies the validity of the statements were measured by their correspondence to the “It”? (SS)
Conversation Two: in which A, B, and C discuss self-reference as an attempt to refer to self’s language.

C: (welcomes A and B into her rooms) Friends, welcome! Tip my hat, bow, curtsy, enquire into your health, chair, tea, coffee, liqueurs, juice—

B: Liqueur.

C: sandwiches, aspirin—what? Oh, certainly.

(C brings refreshments and makes herself comfortable. The other two sit down.)

C: I’d like to continue our discussions on self-reference, and, if you permit me, I’ll use the vocabulary so far offered.

B: Can you?

A: No, no—tell it in your own words, in your own way! It’s not—

C: Permit me, friends: it adds to my dignity to look at my ideas through a new vocabulary... I have thought of a writing as self-referential when it clearly shows that the language is doing the doing and making the description, rather than the object described. In different words, usually it’s inferred that language owes its existence to the items in the outside world and to the senses we have to perceive them. In this inference, language is not: self-referential, but rather language is: not self-referential... it’s other referential. If I wanted to describe language as self-referential, I would have to change around the above inference. I would have to say that in a self-referential writing, the language generates something of which the notion of the Real World is one trace; the language is not just the tracing paper on which the Real World writes itself.

A: Well said!

B: Well done! To this I would add the following: the reputation of language as a reflection of reality is known; we say we use language to describe what’s going on. This is language’s depictive reputation. What you point out is not well known: language’s ability to generate reality. Language is consequential, not only depictional.

C: Right! A self-referential writing would encourage us to look at what language is doing and making, and not to continuously look back at that which it, allegedly, is depicting.

B: How would it do that?

C: Well, I have here a piece of writing that I think at least tries to accomplish some of this. It’s not very good, but if you take a look—

A: A moment, friends, a moment. There’s something that disturbs me in what you both are saying.

C: Yes, well, now is not a good moment to be disturbed—right when I’ve summoned the courage to show you both a piece of my writing! Where is sensitivity? Imagination? Where is put-yourself-in-the-other-gal’s-shoes? Where—

A: I won’t enjoy the poem if something is buzzing in my head! Wait, give me a moment to put my finger on it. (B and C wait and give A a moment to put her finger on it.)

A: Well, alright, the first thing, which is easy: you are here discussing self-reference in language, right? In this case, if someone were to ask the question: “To what does the word ‘self’ in ‘self-reference’ apply?” you would answer, “To language.” Right?

C: Right. And the reason I think it’s important is—

B: (to A) Do you need reasons?

A: No.

C: But my reasons are important! I say that—

B: Later. (to A) And the rest of the buzzing in your head is—

A: You were both emphasizing language’s consequential ability. That’s fine—I go along with that. To put what you’re saying in my words, I’d say that present-day language is equipped with a finite set of registrations (a grammar, if you will), and the capabilities of this set will determine the profile of the described. So I agree that—

B: But where do you disagree? You give us a lot of sentences of what you agree with. It’s the buzzing I was after, not a flurry of reformulations.

A: (nettled) Because it’s in my formulations that something seems forgotten. You both persist in ignoring what language is pointing back to—and that’s where I think you’re forgetting something. The actual grammar of a language is produced by, and is reproducing, paradigms—and we must not forget that. Language is produced by paradigms, and—

B: Say your criticism in one sentence, please.

A: Why is brevity such a fetish with you??

B: Because otherwise I can’t remember what I’m being asked to respond to.

A: Bah.

C: Now, now. Amici! Freundinnen! Calm yourselves. (to A) Now, what is your point?

B: See?

A: (sighs) Let me ask it as a question: do you agree that language has been affected by paradigms?

C: Yes! Certainly! Did I say something that made you think otherwise?

A: Yes! You said not to look back at what language is depicting—

C: Aha! Aha. Ok, I see: the confusion is over the metaphor “looking back”. So, let me clear it up this way: yes, we should trace the paradigms that influence language both in looking back and, since language reproduces them, in looking forward. Indeed, we should sleuth
language. However, with the words “depictional” and “consequential”, I think B was getting at the “looking out there” reputation that language has.

A: Another “looking”. What’s that?
B: Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.
A: Don’t put off for tomorrow what you can do today.
C: No cause to be so negative. Actually, what I have
B: No, no, out with it!
C: Well, actually, I think now is not the best moment—
A: Y es, where is that poem you were about to show us?
B: And how do you do that?
A: Yes, where is that poem you were about to show us?
C: Well, actually, I think now is not the best moment—
B: No, no, out with it!
A: Courage! Forge on!
C: No, I have something else I feel is more appropriate. We
A: Don’t put off for tomorrow what you can do today.
B: Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.
C: No cause to be so negative. Actually, what I have
here is quite delightful—it’s called “Sleuthing the Language”—
A: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
B: Do that which makes your mother proud.
C: That’s better—and it’s a little booklet that does the two
things we’ve mentioned: (looks at A) it traces the
paradigms that influence language—so there you are, A; and it definitely looks right at the language, and not
only at what the language means.
B: Is it self-referential?

C: Yes, and it teaches how to take a self-referential stance
towards language. Let’s take a look at it.

Sleuthing the Language: Workbook

Lecture

(Lecturer goes to the podium, lays down her papers, arranges her sleuthing hat.)

Lecturer: (clears throat) Ah mmmmm. It seems that— It could be said—I think we can all agree that— After much thought and reflection, I think we can begin to—(mumbles to herself) darn, can’t seem to get started. Ah hmmmmpf! (clears her throat again)

A grammar produces and reproduces the present paradigmatic bases stored in language. I examine both those components which are locations for language’s general paradigm “storing” or paradigm “holding” power, and those components which are the location of the particular paradigm, which present-day language argues. The verb “argue” is important. I am looking for an arguing language; I am not looking for an arguing speaker, though an arguing speaker may distract me from seeing an arguing language. If I am successful in my analysis of the syntax of a writing, then the correct reply from the writer (if I had him in front of me alive and squawking) would be an indignant: “but I didn’t say that! All I said was…!”

What I attempt here is to expose those parts of syntax whose usage renders the difference between its users indistinguishable; and whose usage argues beyond the intended arguments of its users. The moment of the indignant squawk: “I didn’t mean that! What I meant was…!” is the moment I am looking for, and is the moment these self-referential investigations hope to elicit: the moment when the writer hadn’t said that, and language had.

With a gesture towards orderly investigation, I will peruse parts of speech: subject-verb-object, copulative verb “to be”, conjunctions, adjectives, for their argumentative bias.

Location: subject-verb-object

. . . we are compelled in many cases to read into nature fictitious-acting entities simply because our sentence patterns require our verbs, when not imperative, to have substantives before them. We are obligated to say ‘it flashed’, or ‘a light flashed’, setting up an actor IT, or a light, to perform what we call an action, FLASH. But the flashing and the light are the same; there is no thing which does something, and no doing.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, Language, Thought, Reality

Here Whorf has scrutinized a location—subject of the sen-
tence, verb—and has observed that the grammar of the En-
lish language requires the image of an actor and an action,
and will create that image even when one’s perceptions sup-
ply no evidence for it. I observe a few other features of this
location:

I heard a musical piece that used train sounds to create a mu-
sical event instead of ‘normal’ pitches and tones. The composi-
tion used actual sounds to create an emotional impression on me
as compared with a standard sequence of notes. In fact, it prob-
ably stimulated my emotions more than normal music because I
couldn’t anticipate what should happen next and therefore I had
to really listen to it.

Scott Frazier, member of Music 100 class

In these sentences a listener-turned-writer makes a point con-
cerning the use of train sounds as a musical component. How-
ever, other points are also being made. The subject-verb-
object construct (“The composition created an emotional im-
pression on me” and “It stimulated my emotions”) is making
an argument for the paradigm of objectivity. In this construct
the perceived, the music, is given the role of actor, and the
perceiver, the listener, the role of acted-on. Thus an image
is produced of the relationship between music and listener
in which the perceiver sees himself as a vessel, a receptacle,
with reality (the perceived) playing the dominant role. This
syntax places the music as acting subject, and the listener as
the acted-on object. It also places the listener in a particular
time frame with regard to the music: the listener happens af-
terwards. This syntax ascribes fixity, first occurrence, and the
status of initiation to the music, the listener and her feelings
coming afterwards.

**Location: copulative verb “to be”**

Unaccompanied melody is frequent in Messiaen’s work. Even
more frequent than unaccompanied melody are phrases accom-
panied by rich, static chords, or by chords in almost parallel
motion…What is rare is a chord progression motivated by the
melody or counterpoint…

Larry Austin, *Music in the 20th Century*

The above excerpt intends to describe general characteristics
of a composer’s way of composing. Yet, louder than this in-
tention is another intention: the gesture of scientific objectiv-
ity flaunted by the language used. The pattern of noun plus
some form of verb “to be” (“unaccompanied melody is…”,”
“what is rare is…””) gives the writing the gesture of an ob-
jective scientific research, investigating the question “What is
music?”; implying that music *is*. This language imitates “sci-
entificness” by reducing music to its parts (“The first move-
ment consisted of three episodes of equal length”, for exam-
ple) and by behaving as if the existence of music can be re-
duced to a description of what happens in the music (“The
music opens with a timpani roll, followed by a duet between
trumpet and flute”). Objectivity posits the notion that the truth
is there, the truth *is*, whether I see it or not; in the above ex-
ample, the objective gesture of the language posits that music
*is*, independent of listeners. The following piece of journal-
ism also is dependent on an argumentative underpinning of
objectivity-as-truth in order to make its impact. The writer,
backed by the objective gesture of the language, reproduces
the position of spokesperson for truth:

Young persons today are looking for a style. They are also
looking for a leader—the kind of leader that Copland was in the
30’s, that Boulez and Babbitt were in the post-war period. For
some years now there has been a general realization that almost
three decades of the serial music practiced in international cir-
cles have led to nowhere. It may be true that elements of the
language have penetrated the vocabulary of all composers. It is
also true that none of the music created during that period has
entered the active repertory.

*Harold Schonberg

*New York Times*, December 12, 1972

**Location: Conjunctions—“But”**

A conjunction determines the relationship between two phrases,
providing a third piece of information:

The music was complicated, *and* I liked it.
The music was complicated *because* I liked it.
The music was complicated *but* I liked it.

In addition to the information from the two phrases—the mu-
 sic was complicated, I liked it—the conjunction tells us the
connection between these two pieces of information, and their
positional value in relation to one another.

I focus on the conjunction “but”.

“It was a concert of new music, but it was very enjoyable.”

It may appear that “but” simply makes the second phrase
qualify the first. More, however, is happening than that.
“But” is a location where the unstated meets and directs the
stated. “But” will hide an argument of the stated; this unstated
argument will rule over the two stated phrases. The first
phrase by itself is a report; its unstated assumption (“Concerts
of new music are rarely enjoyable”) becomes visible only
retroactively when we hear the second phrase. This second
phrase is a report in conflict with the unstated assumption of
the first phrase. This conflict doesn’t negate the assumption,
but rather bolsters it. The relation formed between the first
and second phrases thereby turns the assumption into an ar-
gument: “It was a concert of new music, and was therefore
not enjoyable”; the “but” conceals the argument by denying
it. The second phrase is the stated exception which proves the
unstated rule. The flurry of activity of one phrase negating
something of another phrase takes our attention away from
what lies un-negated, unspoken, thus untouched: the argu-
mentative underpinning.

“But” is a component which is a location for language’s gen-
eral paradigm “storing” power, as mentioned in the beginning. It does not promote a particular paradigm; rather, it provides a place of concealment for all.

I consider “but” a kind of ellipsis. In the sentence “It was a concert of new music, but it was very enjoyable”, the “but” ellipses the unspoken assumption that new music concerts are not enjoyable, and this one was an exception. The complete sentence would read:

It was a concert of new music; as we all know, new music is not enjoyable; (but) this one was an exception, it was very enjoyable.

The conjunction “although” has a similar function to the “but”:

Although it was a concert of new music, it was very enjoyable.

(Lecturer goes to the blackboard.)

Let me draw on the blackboard some “but” sentences. I’d like you to supply for me the unstated assumption:

1. New Music achieved rather wide currency for a while, but there was something in the totally organized, totally dissonant, athematic product that proved completely antithetic to the public.
   Unspoken assumption?

2. I like some pop songs, but not all of them.
   Unspoken assumption?

3. The world has in it far too much ugliness; some part of it, perhaps, is required in pursuit of valuable social goals. Subways, for example, are presumably necessary means of useful transportation. But it is wrong—utterly wrong—to impose additional ugliness unnecessarily upon a segment of the world dedicated in its very being to the generation and promotion of beauty.
   Unspoken assumption?

4. I may not know much about art, but I know what I like.
   Unspoken assumption?

5. Most electronic music is very hard to listen to. But not all electronic music has to be that way.
   Unspoken assumption?

6. All over the world the young composers, for about twenty years or more, wrote a kind of deadening, mass-produced music that represented the most advanced thinking but which completely alienated themselves from all but a tiny audience.
   Unspoken assumption?

Unauthorized access to any of the public’s extensive powers, as mentioned in the beginning. It does not promote a particular paradigm; rather, it provides a place of concealment for all.

The student: *(persisting)* It seems to me that the way you’re presenting this investigation of language is also in a kind of scientific, objectivity-oriented way. Am I supposed to ignore that, or what?

Lecturer: *(blows out her cheeks, then explodes)* Oh, well, don’t ignore it, of course! Your observation is correct! I admit it: objectivity does lurk behind even the most fantastical, made-up excursions of investigatory activity: investigations do use the truth-finding syntax of “there is”, and “let’s find out what’s behind this”. You’re right! You’re absolutely right!

Lecturer: *(continuing)* The next location we will peruse is that hot spot: the adjective.

**Location: Adjectives**

That was a sad piece of music.
That music wasn’t very beautiful.
The clarinets played a cheerful melody.

The speaker who uses adjectives in relation to the music intends to describe the way she feels about what she’s heard. However, at least two things occur which counter this intention:

1. The use of an adjective draws attention away from the noun it modifies. Functioning like a switch, an adjective will call attention to the noun’s modification and consequently leave the listener to take for granted the noun and what it refers to. The use of adjectives “assumes” the music and prevents an active investigation of it. At the moment where music and listener might have been investigated, we are instead stopped short—just a word away—by the presence of an adjective, and we are thrown into a world which by now has a life
of its own: the world of adjectives. The adjectival world is a chatty world; adjectives chatter to one another, speak across to one another over the heads of the nouns they modify: a “loud” piece of music will recall a “soft” piece of music, a “pretty” duck will recall an “ugly” duck, the “best” conversation will recall the “OK” conversation—no one will stop and investigate “music”, or “duck”, or “conversation”.

In the following excerpt, taken from a review of a book on new music, the reviewer joins us in suspiciously regarding the world of adjectives. (Mr. P. is the author of the book.)

Mr. P. introduces us to a different milieu, namely that of the efficient manufacture of the product for which Hansen and Machlis provide the public relations department, viz., “modern music”. To judge from the instructions contained in this book, this manufacture consists of seizing handfuls of notes and doodling with them, the only procedural control being that provided by the need for the applicability to the result of adjectives such as “tempestuous”, “lyric”, or “melancholy”...

George Winham, reviewing a book on modern music

2. While the process of a speaker turning to an adjective may have begun with the speaker’s desire to express himself, the result defeats this desire. Grammar has it that, in most cases, an adjective stands next to the described object. Thus an adjective is credited as being a property of the thing modified, and not, as intended, a placemark for the relation between describer and described.

In the case of an adjective which modifies the subject of a sentence and is preceeded by some form of the verb “to be”, we have an additional confusion. Heinz von Foerster writes:

Confusing relations with predicates has become a political pastime. In the proposition “spinach is good”, “good” is a relation between the chemistry of spinach and the observer who tastes it. He may refer to his relation to spinach as good. Our mothers, who are the first politicians we encounter, make use of the semantic ambiguity of the syntactic operator “is” by telling us “spinach is good” as if they were to say “spinach is green”.

Heinz von Foerster
The Perception of the Future and the Future of Perception

(Lecturer peers at the students.)

Let’s take a break, and then come back and peruse some newspaper articles for evidence of what we’ve been locating.

Dialogue One between Ergo and Evertheless

(Ergo steps forward to greet Evertheless, who has just delivered the lecture on Sleuthing the Language.)

Ergo: I found this article in The Weekly, and I was wondering what you’d think of it. It’s not really about music at all—it’s about the dulcimore—but the writer kind of makes a preamble—whoops, I shouldn’t have said “but”… Y’know, all this talk about language tends to make me very self-conscious.

Evertheless: And is that positive or negative?

Ergo: What—being self-conscious? Negative, of course! Or well, no, not of course … well, positive, in a way. But then, really, it’s negative—oh gee, there I go, another “but”. (darkly, to herself) This is going to turn me into a stutterer.

Evertheless: Look here, I wasn’t arguing against using “but”. I was arguing against using it without being attentive to what is going on. And don’t look accusingly at me every time you say “but”.

Ergo: Well, alright. (casts a suspicious glance at Evertheless) Anyway, take a look at the beginning of the article:

THE DULCIMORE

Much of what is called “new music” is derived from and based on intellectual ideas, often reflecting them in structure and development. This requires a new way of listening, and a new relationship between the audience and composer/performer. New music is not composed just to stimulate the ears, but to provoke thoughts and ideas. This is all well and good, except when the pre-rational experience of sound is lost. When all becomes intellectual abstractions, the purely sensory experience of the music, which comes down to us through thousands of years of thundering drums and pagan rituals, is lost. The heart and soul of the music evaporate, and the result is that people can’t dance.

There is, however, a way of creating new music which avoids this problem. Instead of composing ever stranger pieces, one can invent a new way to play music by inventing a new instrument. The result is not radically new structures, but a new sound… Dennis Wolf is a musician who has created new music by creating a new instrument: the 20 string electric dulcimore.

Gene Splice
The Weekly, January 17, 1981

Ergo: With that introduction, the writer is sure making a case for the dulcimore being new music!

Evertheless: Bravo!

Ergo: What? I sure didn’t think you’d say that.

Evertheless: That the writer makes a case for the dulcimore being new music is not the problem. The problem enters when we take a look at all the other things his language is making a case for. Does the writer know, for example, how his language argues that there exist non-intellectual ideas? Or that old music is composed just to stimulate the ears?
Evertheless: Jiminy, did I give that lecture in vain? Did I not remember that distinction. But if all I have in front of me is the language left by the writer, then how do I tell which is which?

Evertheless: Well, a piggyback adjective is when (not)

Ergo: What's that?

Evertheless: (explodes) What do you mean, “that’s what that was for”??—really, mercy, I don’t—

Ergo: Ok, ok, got it. So, what do you think—give me a few hints as to how to go about looking at this writing.

Evertheless: Well . . . alright . . . though all this has put me into an extremely argumentative mood . . . thought I had made everything clear and then find out my work is just beginning! . . . I mean, what is the point of teaching if—well, anyway. Let me take a look. Ok, in this article I’d take a good look at the but’s and the adjectives. Remember, the idea is to take that look at the writing that it wouldn’t have taken of itself. So let’s peruse the but’s: the first but-sentence reads: “New music is not composed just to stimulate the ears, but to provoke thoughts and ideas.” One unspoken assumption: that music that stimulates the ears doesn’t provoke thoughts and ideas. The second but-sentence: “The result is not radically new structures, but a new sound.” The assumption: that radically new structures don’t make new sounds. Does the writer know that the language he’s using is making a case for these two assumptions? Now, moving on, if we take a look at the adjectives, we find that we have “piggy-back” adjectives.

Ergo: What’s that?

Evertheless: Well, a piggyback adjective is when (not “what”, if you recall) a noun is turned into an adjective, and then this adjective is used to modify itself in its original noun form. An extreme example: meaningful meanings, experimental experiments, poetic poetry. Most piggyback adjectives are not so obvious—the meaning of the noun is adjectivized and then attached back to the original noun—so we have things like: intellectual ideas, intellectual abstractions, active investigations, personal opinions, indicting criticisms—that’s what Mr. Splice uses. Piggyback adjectives not only call attention away from the nouns—as do all adjectives; they also promote the decay of meaning of the noun. Since an adjective functions to qualify a noun, we undergo a retroactive correction in the case of the piggyback adjective: we are made to feel there was something lacking in the noun which the adjective now supplies—otherwise, what was that adjective there for? So now it’s no longer enough to have “ideas”, now we must have “intellectual ideas”. With piggyback adjectives we have an example of something that I didn’t really cover in my lecture—and that’s learning to read what a phrase or a sentence implies. Reading implication is similar to the activity of finding the unstated assumptions in a “but” location: the language on the page in front of you is pointing to something that’s not on the page in front of you. Would Mr. Splice agree with these implications that his language summons?: Sentence One implies that old music is not derived from and based on intellectual ideas;

Dialogue Two between Ergo and Evertheless

Ergo: I was thumbing through that book you recommended, Slonimsky's Encyclopedia of Musical Inverte, and I noticed something pretty odd. I wrote down one of those reviews of music that struck me oddly:

In Berg’s opera Wozzeck nothing sings and nothing dances. Everything screams hysterically, weeps drunken tears, jitters, spasmodically wriggles, and writhes in epileptic convulsions. The classical forms of pas sacaglia, fugue, and sonata are used as objects of savage modernistic mockery . . . All is calculated to stun the human ear and to insult the aesthetic sense of any normal and healthy human being.

V. Gorodinsky
Musical Journal

Evertheless: Hmnmnm.

Ergo: Now what’s odd is that, despite what the writer intends, these are pretty good reports of what the music does.

Evertheless: What do you mean by that?

Ergo: Well, if these sentences were meant as reports, they’d be fine. But the writer doesn’t mean them only as reports—he means them as criticisms. I can actually hear the complaining sarcastic melody he’d use if he
were speaking those sentences—and he uses them to support his conclusion, which is to indict the music for doing all those things.

**Evertheless:** *(regards Ergo with new respect, new interest, new—? She newly regards Ergo)* So the reports are only used as evidence for an argument against the music.

**Ergo:** Right. Save for that conclusion and that complaining melody, they’d be fine. It’s odd: I wouldn’t attack the writer’s hearing (these sentences show he did hear something); however, I would certainly attack his interpretation of what he heard.

**Evertheless:** *(becoming debonair and expansive in the presence of a fellow investigator)*

Ah, my friend, what you say interests me. Suppose that in addition to supplying the unstated assumptions of the but’s and the unstated implications of sentence structures, a language-referring reader would also supply the assumed melody of the sentences in front of her.

**Ergo:** Yep. I have a real live example of this. When I told you I was becoming increasingly self-conscious about my speaking, you asked whether that was a positive or a negative comment. That caught me off-guard: the way I was saying the words, to be self-conscious was negative, so I assumed that everyone thought of being self-conscious as negative. When you asked me, I became suddenly very self-conscious about my assuming its melody.

**Evertheless:** And I heard in your melody not just a report of how you felt, but already an argument against my making you feel that way.

**Ergo:** There are probably a lot of words and phrases whose melodies are assumed, and therefore what they argue for or against is also assumed.

**Evertheless:** I think what you’re saying can be applied to one of my pet infuriating articles. Here, read it:

**PROFESSOR GEARS CONCERT TO AVERAGE LISTENERS**

Have you ever listened to music that is completely generated by computers or synthesizers? If you have, you know that it is impossible to listen for very long without being completely bored or developing a tremendous headache. If you have ever felt that way, do not despair, you are not the only one.

Scott Wyatt, associate professor of music and director of the University’s experimental music studios, said “Most electronic music is very difficult to listen to.” But, according to Wyatt, not all electronic music has to be that way. “Since 1971, electronic music has become much more accessible to the average listener,” said Wyatt. It is with Wyatt’s concert tonight that he hopes to be one step closer to obtaining his goal of having all electronic music accessible to the average listener.

*Theresa Grimaldi, The Daily Illini, September 8, 1982*

**Evertheless:** Take a look at the statement “Most electronic music is very difficult to listen to.”

**Ergo:** *(takes a look)*

*Evertheless:* There are at least two things to be noticed.

First, “difficult” is posited as a property of the “it”. I’ve already talked about the relations-predicate confusion in my lecture, so no need to go into that.

**Ergo:** *(mumbling)* Well, it is hard to listen to, you know.

**Evertheless:** *(pauses, then goes on)* Yes, Right. However the second thing to be noticed about this statement fits into our discussion about implied melodies. The statement could indeed be taken as just a report: that electronic music is very difficult to listen to. However, with the appearance of the next sentence—“But, according to Wyatt, not all electronic music has to be that way”—the hidden melody of the first sentence we looked at is retroactively exposed. “Most electronic music is very difficult to listen to” is not just a report, it’s an indictment already being used as an argument. The assumption is well hidden in that melody—the assumption being that something which is difficult to listen to is undesirable.

**Ergo:** Isn’t it?

**Evertheless:** That’s not what we’re talking about. I don’t want to get involved in the argument.

**Ergo:** Why not?

**Evertheless:** Oh, because I have a cold and my head hurts and tomorrow is my birthday.

**Ergo:** *(looks puzzled)*

**Evertheless:** Oh look here, you know why: the idea is to observe the mechanisms, not to get ourselves enmeshed in them.

**Ergo:** Oh.

**Evertheless:** Your astuteness is not entirely reliable, nor predictable.

**Ergo:** What? I didn’t—

**Evertheless:** Let’s proceed. Note that while the phrase “difficult to listen to” is carried by a negative melody, the phrase “accessible to the average listener” is assumed to be positive.

**Ergo:** And who, by the way, is The Average Listener? Or is that getting involved in the arguments?

**Evertheless:** No no, you’re right on target. What you do is exactly what this language doesn’t want you to do: to start observing it, start calling it. What this language, and other examples of newspaper language want, is that you fall into the argument without being able to observe how. *How* this language makes you slide is via the greasy lubrication of familiarity: familiar language hides its assumptions while sliding you along on them.

**Ergo:** But what is familiar language?

**Evertheless:** It’s language which doesn’t make you stop and look at it—at its links, its arguments, its values, and its cliché packages (for example, the phrase “average listener” is a cliché package, also the phrase “straight to the heart”). Arguing by use of the familiar is what a
newspaper will do. What it won’t do is say anything that will prevent this process of swinging from one “You know what I mean” to another. A newspaper’s gesture is “You know what I mean”, while with self-reference the gesture is “Do I know what I mean?”, and with language-reference “Do I know what it means?” (Evertheless rubs her nose, her hands, her hair) See, what you bring up with this melody thing makes me remember all my favorite axes to grind.

Ergo: (demurely) Cliché package.

Evertheless: The whole argument behind the word “accessible” interests me. The melody that makes the phrase “difficulty in listening” undesirable, and the phrase “accessible to the average listener” desirable, is a melody that haunts the present situation of new music. Just take a look at this statement by a composer who says he writes new music:

My Third String Quartet, composed for the Concord String Quartet, comes at the end of almost twenty-five years of a ceaseless search for the most potent and effective way to translate my musical energies into the clearest and most direct patterns of feeling and thought. At the beginning of this search, I entered the world of atonality and serialism and came to terms with the musical esperanto that Arnold Schoenberg had conceived...

George Rochberg
liner notes for recording of Third String Quartet

Evertheless: What do you notice?

Ergo: Hmmmmm. It reads decent enough ... sounds intelligent ... no spelling mistakes ... Evertheless: That’s not the point! What do you see there, or see implied there?

Ergo: Well, there aren’t any “but’s”, so I’ll scan the adjectives ... “ceaseless” ... “potent and effective” ... “musical” ... “clearest and direct” ... hmmm, could it be in the “clearest and direct”? Evertheless: Ach! You shouldn’t need to ask me!

Ergo: Well, there are so many words and then you get so disgusted when I either fall into an argument or—

Evertheless: Alright alright. Yes, it’s the adjectives “clearest and direct” that angle the whole writing. Once again the underlying melody slips us into sharing its assumption that “clearest and direct” are desirable and may be used as both argument and standard for listening experiences.

Ergo: Also the writer places them as properties of the music, and not of the listening relation.

Evertheless: Correct.

Ergo: And also since he writes that he “searched ceaselessly for 28 years” for those two adjectives “clearest and direct”, they must be something!

Evertheless: Right. Now, so that you don’t think that it’s only peeping me and you who eavesdrop on language, read what another composer of new music writes about the use of those adjectives:

... each generation will create its own supermarket music—like produce that, after eight days, is rotten and you can’t eat it anymore and have to toss it away. And, therefore, I’m always astonished that composers speak in terms of quantity, i.e., “Music is valid if it has more than two thousand people listening to it.” For me, that’s no criterion of validity. And when composers say that they’ve found a direct approach to an audience, what is that really? The “direct approach” is usually an experience that the audience has already had but with a new coat of paint on it, so to speak—that’s all. And that’s not a new experience. I find that very superficial and an avoidance of the real problems ...

Pierre Boulez, “On New Music”
The New York Review, October 2, 1984

Self-Reference and the Language ...
Conversation Three: in which a self-referential composition is examined.

(The next night, B and A arrive once again at the home of C. C looks unwell.)

A: And now, what about that “self-referential” poem you were going to show us.

C: Oh, well, I’ve changed my mind. It’s not good enough, really. I think I raised your hopes about it, and it was just an exercise, really. Let’s talk about something else.

(A and B look at C sourly.)

C: Oh, darn, I wasn’t going to do that—I promised myself I would show you the poem, if you wanted to see it, and without any apologies. Why do I become so apologetic suddenly?

A: Yes, why?

B: Never mind why, let’s see the poem.

C: Yes, but it’s so odd, this always happens to me the moment right before I show anything. It’s so silly. I think it has something to do with my background, being raised a Chr—

B: Let’s see it.

C: And then my parents were Dogm—What? Oh, alright. But, wait a minute before I show it to you. I want to say one last thing.

B: Let’s see it.

C: It’ll be short. In the contexts in which I’ve been speaking, self-reference is a linguistic activity where the measuring language is measured.

A: Yes, and—?

C: That’s it.

B: I can practically remember it: where the measuring language is measured. Why so brief, suddenly?

C: Spite, probably. Here it is:

Persecution Sells

. . . so they took the black woman and beat her and—

Persecution sells. What is it that doesn’t?—

. . . selling . . .

sells.

. . . saying who persecutes who . . .

sells.

“. . . when they take you to a cell and . . .”

saying “they”, sells.

“. . . we’re all to blame . . .”

sells.

“. . . and when you look at the fuckin’ bastards—”

anger, sells.

“. . . everything, brothers and sisters, sells—”

cynicism, sells.

B: It would help if you were to read it to us. (C reads the poem aloud.)

A: That’s better—it becomes clearer when you read it. You propose something in the first sentence, then in the second sentence you scan the language of the first. And you repeat this structure.
C: Hmmmm, that’s an odd—
A: Must it be only two stages?
C: What do you mean?
A: Couldn’t you have, in addition to the first two sentences, a third sentence which calls the second sentence on its paradigmaticism, and—
C: then a fourth sentence which calls the third—
A: and a fifth sentence which calls the fourth, and so on?
C: Well, there’s no rule against it . . . hmmm . . . my attempt here with self-reference was to expose paradigms in language. If I continued this, “calling” sentence upon sentence, I think it would begin to make fun of self-reference.
B: (to C) You’re pointing at the possibility of infinite regress.

A: Yes. In science it’s well-known that self-reference can be regressive. As a matter of fact, a main argument for preventing self-reference from being a respected member of the scientific method is the possibility of infinite regression.
B: That self-reference may be infinitely regressive is a report; but science treats it as an argument.
C: If self-reference were a part of the scientific method, then science might become in tune with the notion that cognition is a subject-dependent phenomenon.
A: I like to imagine what a self-referential scientific description of society would be.
B: What do we need such that self-reference become a member of the scientific method?
Conversation Four: in which self-reference is connected with listening to new music.

(F, a retired engineer, bumps into A and asks diffidently whether she has time to talk.)

A: (bracing herself) Well, half an hour. As you know, I’ve been investigating self-reference and trying to approach it from different corners and angles. I could tell you about the two angles I’ve got so far on it, but right now I need you to help me find a more scientific approach to self-reference. Self-reference, you may recall, is when that which had made a distinction, now becomes the object of its own distinguishing: an “it” is made to refer to itself.

F: (Handy with diagramming pencil, he draws on a napkin.) Ok:

A: So that smaller sign is the first distinction, and the larger sign is distinguishing the first one?

F: Right. That’s the sign for distinguishing.

A: (pleased) Good, that looks very scientific. Now self-reference, as an operation, involves three elements: a describer, what the describer describes (some “it”), and the describing language.

F: (draws)

A: Self-reference, as I’ve been investigating it so far, has emphasized the relations between the two elements of the describer and the describing language. In one conversation with B and C, we claimed that the word “self” in “self-reference” refers to the describer with the aim of eliciting the self. In two other conversations, “self” meant the describing language referring to itself, for purposes of eliciting and uncovering paradigmatic bases in language—language calling on itself.

F: So in the first conversation you had this:

and in the other two conversations something like this:

A: Right. Now, here’s where you come in. Suppose we became ambitious and wanted self-reference to aid in the cognizing of the described: the it.

F: Ok, no problem. Tell me what you have in mind, exactly. (F poises his drawing pencil.)

A: Well, all this hullabaloo I’ve been making over self-reference was initiated by my desire to enable listeners to hear new music better.

F: (drops his pencil) What?? New music? Are you kidding? You mean you’ve been bringing self-reference in, in order to connect it to new music?

A: (taken aback) Well, yes. I just thought—

F: Oh, great. Well, why didn’t you bring in the theory of relativity, or, or—what about quantum physics? I’m sure they connect with self-reference just as well as new music does. Or, say, what about thermo-dynamics—

A: (stung) Hold it: you asked me what I had in mind and so I told you. It’s less far-fetched than you think—

F: It better be more far-fetched than I think. (secretly F is pleased—he likes when something is far-fetched.)

A: (flustered) Now calm down, would you. Just pick up that pencil and calm yourself. (A mops her brow and tries to calm herself.) Ok, now follow my logic. (F makes ready to follow. He’s very glad he decided to talk with A: this is fun.)

A: Now, suppose someone listens to some new music.

F: Ok, let’s suppose that.

A: Suppose the listener has difficulty registering what’s going on in the music.

F: That we don’t even need to suppose.

A: Suppose that the listener, reflecting on her difficulty, wonders what to do? How to hear better? Now suppose this listener takes a radical turn of mind, and, neither indicting herself nor the music, she decides that there might be something in what she’s calling “her listening” that prevents her from being able to register.

F: And what might that be, suppositionally speaking?

A: You remember my first dissertation article. I proposed that the distinction between listening and describing be further investigated, and that the ability to register what one is hearing is dependent on the capabilities of the language one has.

F: Aha, I think I’m on the track. Suppose that this very unusual listener establishes a connection between her registering the music and the language she has at her disposal, and decides that this language is a carrier of attitudes and notions that prevent her from being able to register the music . . .

A: And that this language, which is supposed to be speaking in the name of the music it is trying to describe, is actually speaking against that music . . .
F: And that this language has become a standard against which new music is measured. . .
A: Supposing all this, this quite delightful listener decides to turn to self-reference with the idea that with self-reference we can now measure this measuring language.
F: And that with self-reference, the act of a describer turning on the language of her perceptions will actually enable her to hear the music better than if she didn’t. So a listener, examining her descriptions, will better cognize the it. Let me draw:

A: (ecstatic) Exactly! What do you think?
F: (pauses, looks at A and at what he has drawn, then says flatly) Impossible. It doesn’t make any sense!
A: Oh yes it does, it does! We just made it make sense.
F: Well, let’s go through it again, a little slower. (he squints at his drawing.) How ever did I arrive at—
A: No, look, it does make sense. If a listener-describer says to himself, “I’m just going to listen to the music” (without taking into account how describing affects his listening)—then this will limit his registering the music to what he has already heard and understood. However, if he says, “I’m looking at my language about music”—then this will enable him to register what’s new about the music. Didn’t you mention something last summer about causal circularity?
F: Causal circularity? No, you mean circular causality . . . hmmm, let me think a minute about this. (A lets him think a minute about this.) Ok, got it. (F gets out pencil, piece of computer print-out scrap paper.) Simply put, you have the describer, and language, and music. (F draws this.)

And you could say that there is a circular causality which is the system containing describer and language and music, and that an output of this system is the ability to hear the music. That’s very general.

A: (looks admiringly at the drawing) That’s very good.
F: But it’s very general. You’re talking about looking at language so that the relationship with the music changes.
A: Right.

F: Let me explain what circular causality means. Circular causality is when you notice an event and you notice that it causes a second event; then you notice another event caused by the second event; then you notice that this event, the third event, causes another event which is the first event. It’s important that I’m using the word “notice”—it’s not that the one event exists before the other. Circular causality aggravates a notion of time—well, I’m not sure of that. . .
A: Do there have to be three events, or—
F: Oh no, there can be more, or just two events: that the first causes the second and the second causes the first. Now, actually, I’d like to draw a slightly more complicated diagram:

A: Hmmmm, oh my. How do you explain, though, this circular causality in relation to what I said?
F: I’m just getting to that. We can have an instance where we don’t notice things, we notice structures. Of our ability to perceive music, we might ask, “What’s that a structure of? How does it happen?” To answer this in a way consistent with your ideas, I’d say the following: in this diagram we start by assuming that some music has been played and heard by a listener. The listener articulates something about the music, which is a statement of his perception as a listener framed in the language he has at his disposal. Now what you want is that he then observes his sentence, and makes a sentence about that sentence (and then he can go on and make a sentence about the sentence, and so on, if he likes) and—
A: (breathlessly) and?—
F: And this moment of self-reference will result in a change of perception of the music.
A: It will? (jubilant) You’re kidding? It will?
F: Wait a minute—I thought this is what you were saying. I’m just laying it out according to circular causality.
A: Oh, you’re right: this is what I’m saying. It’s just that I was so glad hearing it come out of someone else’s mouth for a change.
F: (perusing A skeptically) Are you sure you know what you’re doing?
A: (indignant) Of course not! Let’s go back to the diagram. Does anything happen next?
F: After coming up with a statement about his first statement, the listener then reviews the music under his new set of sentences, and then the whole process can start up again. Or actually, it would be the music that’s reviewing the sentences—however, that’s a metaphor.
A: (quizzing F) And how do you know that?
F: Because you taught me a long time ago that music doesn’t speak for itself; a piece of music can’t really actively review anything. People review things, not music. It’s metaphoric language that says that objects can act like subjects.
A: Satisfactory.
F: So, to wrap it up in terms of circular causality: perceiving music causes a sentence about the music; reflections on this sentence (self-reference) cause another sentence; this other sentence causes a changed perception of the music—and so the circle is back where we started.
A: Excellent, thank you. Now with this diagram in hand, I take heart and will initiate several ambitious projects.
F: Such as?
A: Well, into the spot of the listener, I could plug in a music critic, or a performer—both could use self-reference in relation to their perception of music.
F: Can’t see you having much luck getting a music critic to try reflecting on his own language.
A: True, but I think I can get a group of musicians to rehearse self-referentially . . . Maybe Arun would be willing, and Enslin . . . and . . . Whoops—I just thought of something discouraging: what happens if someone says, “Doesn’t this measuring of language, by language, get us far away from the music?”
F: You could answer that the refusal to measure language has gotten us really far away from music. Or, you could say that the idea of “just listening to the music” has to be understood as a symptomatic phrase, belonging to outdated notions of perception, and that the link between listening and describing is probably closer than the link between listening and music, unfortunately.
A: Or, I could say that the present state of new music—with all this argumentation about “Return to Tonality”—is the result of talking disastrously about music.
F: I once heard B say that that which doesn’t allow you to hear the music, is culture.
A: That’s a terrible thing to say. Probably she’s right.
PART TWO: PROCEEDING SELF-REFERENTIALLY

Introduction to Self-Referential Rehearsals

Self-Reference and Rehearsing

If, while in a problem-solving situation, I suspect that part of the problem may be the language used to describe the problem and its solution, then I might decide to proceed self-referentially.

The rehearsal of a piece of new music is one such situation. Musicians behave in rehearsal as if the function of rehearsal were to just play through the piece, work on trouble spots, get it together, and, in order to expedite the playing-through and the working-on and the getting-it, to talk as little as possible. They behave as if their operations of reading the music and playing the instrument all happened without language.

Rehearsals

I describe rehearsals as situations in which a composition (of music, theater, etc.) confronts the capabilities of the performer; though, since pieces cannot talk, both the confronter and the confronted converse via the performer’s language. Not only does the performer respond to the “confronting” composition, she also posits what the confrontation is that she’s responding to.

I restate: rehearsal is a situation where a composition (of music, theater, etc.) confronts the capabilities of the performer, one of the capabilities being the language she uses. The operations of reading the music and playing the instrument may occur without spoken language, but guiding them is a language so taken for granted that it, indeed, can be left unspoken. This language, I say, may perpetuate problems and prevent solutions. How to make the invisible and powerful come to light? By proceeding self-referentially.

Proceeding Self-Referentially

How might one take a self-referential stance to rehearsing? The ideas I brought to this question were:

1. to sleuth the language
2. to proceed anti-objectively.

To “sleuth the language” meant I would conduct rehearsals in such a way as to encourage those moments when “speaking about our speaking” could be elevated to the status of main event. Further, the “speaking about” would be tapped as a possible resource for rehearsal instructions.

To “proceed anti-objectively” needed a more elaborate preparation. Prior to the process of actually rehearsing, I scrutinized the usual rehearsal proceedings for signs of objectivity-orientations. As stated earlier in this article and at length in Article One, the signs of objectivity-orientation are observable in the frequently consulted metaphors of the music “affecting” the listeners, “moving” them, etc. In these metaphors two main characteristics of objectivity are reproduced: the metaphors create the picture of an observer, receptacle-like, responding to a dominant and dominating outside reality; and they suppress mentioning the effect the observer’s language has on the observer’s listening.

As for musicians rehearsing—when does objectivity orient rehearsals? It orients rehearsals when the proceedings are guided by the directions “let’s just play through the piece till we get it right”, “we’ll be able to play together if everybody just plays their parts right”, and “what the piece means will come to us after we’ve played it right.” In these directions, so taken for granted in rehearsal that they usually go unspoken, musicians produce an image of their relation to performing music in which their participation is passive (receptacle-like, they see themselves as responding to a dominant and dominating reality); and in which their language and its effect on their rehearsing is considered negligible (“playing right” and “being together” go assumed and unexamined).

Having made this analysis of the objectivity-orientation of rehearsals, I proceeded “anti-objectively” by generating proposals that would counteract the orientation. The idea was to impose such language the rehearsals as would make the assumed, silent language that is indeed operating, surface so that it could be examined. I say “to impose” in that I meant to bring into the rehearsals a metaphor that would direct the proceedings and that would have the following consequence: by giving musicians a metaphoric base different from the one they usually refer to, they would be given a position from which to both look back on their habitual base and measure it (“to measure the measuring language”).

Whereas “to sleuth the language” was a one-step process of self-reference (a speaker examined something said), “to proceed anti-objectively” was a two-step process (a metaphor was posited, enabling the silent language to surface so that it could be examined).

In the following pages I have documented the results of taking a self-referential stance to rehearsing. The Performers’ Workshop Ensemble was in the process of beginning to rehearse a study written for the Ensemble by one of the members, Lesley Olson; they agreed to take up my proposal of using self-reference in rehearsal. The members of the Ensemble involved in these rehearsals were Arun Chandra, guitar; Mark
Enslin, bassoon; Lesley Olson, flute; myself, Susan Parenti, piano; Mark Sullivan, bass; and Herbert Brūn, coach. Six rehearsals, over a period of two weeks, each rehearsal lasting an hour and a half, resulted; I directed the proceedings.

I made the following proposals:

1. (proceeding anti-objectively) I threw an image over the events, a metaphor, which I made up after looking through the score. A piece, when initially encountered in rehearsal, is an object of indeterminate shape; so by ‘throwing an image’ onto the piece, I elicit its resistance (to use Maturana’s language of a closed system: I perturb the music). I relayed this metaphor to the players, with the intent that the players, by understanding and consulting the image, would arrive at playing together. (This proposal is introduced in rehearsal 1.)

2. (proceeding anti-objectively) I made not just one metaphor, but two. This was to counteract the notion of the correct interpretation of the piece: for if I have to decide between two images and two ways to play the piece, then I must refer to myself, bolstering subjectivity in order to decide. (This second metaphor is introduced in rehearsal 5.)

3. (sleuthing the language) I “recounted the counting”, which I called “parsing” the piece. By this I mean that with an eye to the events, I revisited the assumed counting: the piece being in 4/4 meter (eight eighth-notes per measure), I gave myself a field of alternatives: some measures could be counted as 3 eighth-notes plus 5 eighth-notes, some as 7 plus 1, and so on. (This is introduced in rehearsal 2.)

4. (sleuthing the language) I consulted a world of a priori intentions, and then worked back to see if these intentions could influence how the piece was to be performed:

   (a) I wanted the piece played so that the subjectivity of the listener would be triggered. This meant to play the piece in a way that the listener would have to make retroactive corrections while listening, and, with retroactive corrections, the listening subject would become the link between two events.

   (b) I wanted the piece played so that the linguistic world in which the piece found itself would be addressed: that clichés would be attacked, general descriptions degeneralized, etc.

   (c) I wanted the piece played so that the performers would be given “a break”.

(These intentions are introduced in rehearsals 3, 4, and 6.)

The following is what these proposals elicited.
Rehearsal One

We find ourselves in Rehearsal One, at the moment after Susan has explained her first image of the piece. Three segments in the music are rehearsed; the players think of ways to implement an image that requires separate notes to be played as though “reaching” towards one another.

Segment 1

Arun (guitar): Susan, enough said. Let’s see if we can execute what you’re saying in the first six measures of the piece.

(the ensemble plays:)

Susan (piano): Hmmmm … in measure 6, flute and bass, could you both play your tremolos as a reach? They shouldn’t be played as short isolated sounds, but rather as one note spanning the distance to the next.

Lesley (flute): (to Sullivan) In that case, the B you have there, you could sustain a little longer. While you tremolo it, make it a whole eighth-note—don’t shorten the value of it.

Sullivan (bass): Ok. In other words, don’t make any separation between you and me.

Lesley: Right. Thinking “connection” would help the interval come out. Let’s try it.

(Sullivan and Lesley play:)

Segment 2

Susan: Could we go back to the first “reach” in the piece, measure 1? I wanted Arun’s (guitar’s) F to appear as though it were extending Enslin’s (bassoon’s) Ab.

Arun: I don’t know if that’s possible. It’s very difficult for me to give the impression that my guitar tone is pressing on toward the bassoon. A guitar’s tone decays, y’know …

Lesley: If you’d come in louder, your sound would last longer and there’d be a better chance of it seeming to extend to the bassoon. Try it, just guitar and bassoon.

(Arun and Enslin try it:)

Enslin (bassoon): (gloomily) It still doesn’t sound like a “reach”. It just sounds like he plays one note and then I play one note.

Segment 3: The notion of “false rehearsing” comes up

Susan: Let’s go on to another “reach”. It’s all bassoon, measures 7-8.

(Enslin plays:)

Susan: (critically) I don’t think that’s right, Mark. You don’t—

Arun: Wait, I have a suggestion. Enslin, can you give an image that there never were those rests between your F# and the Bb? That for a moment you stretch from the F# and are invisible, but then we see you through the clouds and you become visible as you land on the Bb?

Lesley: (to Enslin) You’re playing the separation between the notes, and you should play their connection.

(Enslin plays measures 7-8.)

Enslin: Maybe I should taper the end of the F# …

Sullivan: Instead of tapering the F#, would you try making a crescendo as if you were playing the F# all the way to the Bb? Think a crescendo through the rest and start the Bb at the point at which you think you’re at in the crescendo.

(Enslin tries that.)

Enslin: (to Sullivan) The dynamic marking you’re asking for goes against what’s written in the score, however. What’s written are two crescendos, each starting from nothing.

Sullivan: I know. But I think if you were to practice it falsely for a while, then later you could play what’s written while only thinking the crescendo.

Susan: What do you mean, “practice it falsely”? Sullivan: I mean that for a particular purpose in rehearsing someone goes against what’s written in the score. Later they’d return to playing as written, but with a different orientation.
Enslin: So for a while I’d practice one long crescendo between the two notes, then later I’d play the two crescendos, as written, but think the one crescendo.

Sullivan: Yeah.
Enslin: I don’t believe you, but I’ll try it.

Rehearsal Two

in which “parsing the piece” is proposed, greeted at first with little enthusiasm, and gradually taken up while singing the piece; the word “sustained” is scrutinized.

Sullivan: … and that’s why I don’t think it’s necessary to find the “true” interpretation of the piece, Herbert! I—
Susan: Could we start rehearsing? Everyone’s here.
Sullivan: Yeah, it’s just that—oh well, let’s talk about it later.
Susan: Ok. Today I’d like to “parse” the piece.
Lesley: What’s parsing?
Susan: Parsing is when we take a second look at our counting. We count the piece in such a way that we trace the compositional events, and don’t just count the counting.

(general disgruntled silence.)

Enslin: Can you show what you mean?
Susan: Yes. Yesterday I told you that one image I have of the piece is that it’s divided between short hops and long reaches. Now look at measure 14. The bassoon line could be parsed, or counted, in such a way that the hops (the eighth-notes) are counted with the word “one”, and anything longer than an eighth-note value (the reaches) are sung out for their duration.
Enslin: (slight pause) Ah, can you show what you mean?
Susan: Yeah, I was getting to that! So I’ll sing the bassoon line:

14 bassoon

Susan sings: 1 1 1 1 bah

Enslin: Hmmm.
Susan: Enslin, why don’t you try parsing the flute line in measure 14. Try singing it.
Enslin: With my mouth.
Susan: Yes, with your mouth! I want us to parse through page 2 by singing the music, and not playing our instruments.
Enslin: Alright. (pause) What do I do with the rests?
Susan: Don’t count them.

(Enslin sings:)

14 flute

Enslin sings: bah 1 1 bah

Lesley: What’s the point of this, though?

Arun: To make us distinguish between hops and long reaches—it’s a way of keeping track of something that’s like a simple binary system.
Lesley: I still don’t see the point. The purpose of counting is to have some way of keeping track of where I am in relation to where everyone else is. This way we’re all doing different things and—
Enslin: Well, let’s try it before we reject it.
Arun: Yeah. Then we can reject it with a good conscience.
Susan: Let’s start at measure 14, and sing till the end.

(the ensemble sings measures 14-18.)
Arun: I don’t think we were together, though now I have no way of—
Lesley: Let’s try it slower.

(the ensemble sings, slower.)
Arun: Well, I have a suggestion that will help me. Could we switch the parsing, and sing “bah” on the short hops, but then count out with numbers the durations of the held notes? So I’d sing Lesley’s line like:

14

Arun sings:

This way I won’t get lost when I’m holding out the long notes.
Susan: Well, but—
Enslin: Let’s try it.

(the ensemble sings:)

Lesley: The main problem with that is that now the long reaches are being clicked off with numbers, and so they don’t feel like reaches anymore.
Susan: Yeah, that was exactly what I was going to say before we sang it.
Arun: But this time was the only time I didn’t get lost!

(latex in the rehearsal)

Sullivan: I have another place where we could try parsing. In measure 3 the piano and the guitar play together for a short while, and it seems to me that they’re playing a little snatch of a waltz. I could count what they do as:

\begin{verbatim}
guitar piano
1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 3
\end{verbatim}

Now, am I understanding the idea of “parsing” right, if that measure were counted in groups of 1–2 1–2–3 1–2–3, and then the beginning of the next measure counted 1–2–3?

Susan: Exactly! That’s a good spot. Normally we assume that if a piece is in 4/4 meter that we have to count up to four or, if we’re counting eighth-notes, we have to count up to eight. But with parsing we can trace the particular rhythms of the piece.

Rehearsal Three

in which the tempo, and the terms and associations brought to the word “tempo”, are discussed.

Susan: I’d like to find a tempo for the image of the slow reach in the foreground, punctuated by quick hops heard in the background.
Sullivan: You think a particular tempo could emphasize certain events as being in the foreground or in the background for the listener?
Susan: I think so, otherwise—
Arun: Well, I’ve noticed that under a slow tempo subdivisions become very important—they’re suggested. So, if we’re looking for a tempo where the long reaches will appear as the foreground important event, then—
Susan: We should play it slowly.
Arun: No, the opposite—we should play it faster.
Susan: Then I don’t understand.
Arun: I was trying to say that in a slower tempo the small subdivisions have a chance to appear as main events; under a faster tempo, the short-note durations will be heard as auxiliaries or upbeats to the main events. So if you want the slow moving reaches to come out as the main pillars, then we have to play it faster.

Enslin: I think what he’s saying is analog to what people used to say about pointillistic paintings: if they stood close to the painting the dots appeared as main events; the moment they put distance between themselves and the painting, the dots became components of a larger main event.

Sullivan: Suffering viewed from afar doesn’t look at all like suffering viewed up close.
Lesley: Particularly when someone else is suffering on the other side of the world, that’s entirely different from when I’m suffering in my own room . . . though I think this is off the point.
Susan: So you all are linking “far” with “faster” and “near” with “slower”?
Sullivan: Yeah, I know, it’s risky, but it does point out something about the conditions of how an observer will assess an observed content.
Rehearsal Four

in which players reach a new height of exasperation with the proceedings: Lesley becomes allergic to the phrase “Let’s play it again”; players pester Susan about how to sort out their notes under the metaphor, so that she questions rigorous application of a metaphor; standard musical terminology is offered and refused.

It-picking

Sullivan: ... So, let’s play it again.
Lesley: Which “it”?
Sullivan: What do you mean?
Lesley: That’s what I’m asking you: do you mean to just play through those 6 measures again, or to play using the instruction you just gave, or some new instruction, or what?
Sullivan: Yes.
Lesley: (mad) Sullivan, I—
Sullivan: (mad) What are you suddenly nit-picking—
Arun: She’s it-picking.
Enslin: Wait a minute. Maybe Lesley is just cranky or maybe she does have a point.
Lesley: Yes.
Enslin: Ok. The “Let’s play it again” expression assumes an “it”.
Lesley: “It” assumes we all agree on what “it” is.
Susan: Is that good or is that bad?
Enslin: Bad.
Arun: I don’t agree. Indefinite pronouns like “it” refer to something that was specified before—if we start ruling out indefinite pronouns, our sentences will become long and—
Sullivan: They’re too long anyway. No, ok, I see her point: when I said “Let’s play it again” I was missing an opportunity.
Susan: Which opportunity?
Sullivan: To tell you what instruction I want people to execute. I didn’t want that people “just play through the piece again”—whatever that means; I wanted something quite specific.
Lesley: So, Sullivan, what is the “it” you want us to play?
Sullivan: I want that we play the first eight measures at a slow tempo and make a general crescendo up to the eighth measure.
(the ensemble plays measures 1-8.)

The question of how long to apply a metaphor

Arun: (to Susan) Wait, I’m getting a little confused about these “reach” gestures. Are there any more reach gestures after Enslin’s in measures 7 and 8?

Susan: Yeah. The piano is reaching throughout measures 9, 10 and 11.
Arun: And then the flute’s Eb in measure 14?
Susan: Yeah.
Sullivan: If I don’t know where a reach is, then I would be playing softly, right? So when I have sustained notes, I won’t play the dynamic that would give a reach.
Susan: No, that’s not what I want you to do; I want you to play those sustained notes so that they become the foreground.
Sullivan: Ahhh. The instruction is, sustained notes loudly, short notes softly.
Susan: Yes.
Enslin: I was imagining that everything I have is a slow reach. Wasn’t that what you intended?
Susan: You mean, even the little eighth-note steps?
Enslin: Uh-huh. I would try to play them underneath a slow reach.
Susan: I see.
Enslin: For instance, in measure 14, (Enslin plays this.)

\[
\begin{align*}
14 & \quad 15 \\
\text{Enslin plays this.}
\end{align*}
\]

I was thinking of that as one reach. I don’t know if it comes across that way.
Susan: No. Hmmm. I like the idea which we had established that in going from measure 1 to 2, that was to be a kind of model for the reach, then at 3 and 4, those are supposed to be these moments of punctuation, little hops.
Enslin: (with the melody of changing his ways) Oh, ok.
Brün: And the tremolos, the eighth-note tremolos—are they to be loud or soft?
Lesley: I would answer that, soft. She had said in a previous rehearsal that eighth-notes were to be considered hops, so that means they’ll be soft.
Brün: (to Susan) Is that the way it goes?
Susan: (discouraged at all these checking questions) Yeah.
Brün: (to players) If you now know what you want to do maybe you can do it with less obedience and more . . . more mischief.
Susan: (in an outburst) See, now that’s just the problem: you all are now checking and sorting through all your notes to figure out which are to be considered “reaches” and which are to be considered “punctuations” or “hops”!
Sullivan: What’s wrong with that?
Susan: Well, does it have to be so exhaustive?
Arun: (dourly) Which “it”?
Susan: What we’re now doing! I mean, is it desirable to consolidate all our activity under one metaphoric terminol-
Lesley: Susan, first you give us a metaphor and tell us to follow it, and now when we try to apply it consistently to the notes in front of us, you call that “obedient”?

Susan: (stuttering) Well, no, but see—if it were a question of “consistency”, maybe, but—

Sullivan: I think what she’s asking is whether it’s desirable that we demand, as performers, that all the notes in front of us relate to the main metaphoric image.

Susan: Right! All this checking through notes is not what I wanted to have happen! It looks so musicological.

Enslin: What did you want to have happen?

Susan: (taken aback) Well, I wanted the metaphor to be a suggestion, not a rule . . .

Rehearsal Five

in which Sullivan introduces a different metaphor, “guy wires”; changing metaphors is grappled with and grapples; the Ensemble assesses self-referential rehearsing and where it has been taken; and the distinction between a standard and an orientation is examined.

Guy-wire metaphor

(Sullivan, at the beginning of this rehearsal, has proposed a different metaphor and image for the rehearsing of the music: that each of our parts is following a “guy wire”.)

Susan: Should we crescendo in measure 4?

Sullivan: That terminology is not within “guy wire” terminology.

Susan: Hmmmm.

Sullivan: (insistent) The image should orient the execution.

(Enslin still looks puzzled.)

Sullivan: (losing his insistence) Well, maybe I should come up with more language to fill in the metaphor and not just keep on saying it doesn’t sound like a guy wire.

Lesley: When I don’t count, that seems to perturb my concentration on the metaphor.

Arun: I need some basic minimal security in order to execute a metaphor.

Sullivan: Well, let’s try it again.

Lesley: Remember, we decided not to use the “that”, or the “it” or “Let’s do it again”.

Sullivan: Right, sorry. Whooh! Ok, let me re-formulate. What I’d like to try with Arun, is going through from the beginning of all wires to the end and, in order to prevent people from getting knocked off track of their wires, I’d like somebody to take over or conduct.

Susan: Just you and Arun.

Sullivan: Ah, no. Each of us would play a wire or a set of wires. Don’t forget that the wire weighs the most before it changes direction: it accumulates the weight of all the notes strung on it until it reaches a high or low point.

Susan: Sullivan, I’m curious about how you’re following you wire in measure 14, where you and I play together. How do you execute it?

Enslin: “execute it”?

Susan: Ahh, no . . .

(All laugh.)

Enslin: That’s a metaphor.

Sullivan: Hang that cat.

Susan: Isn’t “play the piece” also a metaphor? And an eighth-note, a metaphor?

Arun: That reminds me of the time when Brün had answered someone who was saying that political ideas were extramusical events, he said “Isn’t a C# an extramusical event?”

Change of metaphor

Lesley: In my part, one of the low notes is preceded by many rests—in measure 10 is my low “e” where, according to the guy wire image, I’d be changing direction. I’d need another instruction for how to play a line when it’s preceeded by rests.

Enslin: Why don’t you try it right now, that is, play a movement that starts at the top—

Sullivan: (sings) Bah bah bah bah bumph.

Enslin: —and moves slowly down all the way to the E.

(Sullivan plays:)

Enslin: Hmmmm.

Susan: I guess what I’m asking is how long, and to what degree of rigorousness, should a metaphor be applied to the music?

Avoiding musical terminology

Brün: (to Susan) What do you call a “reach”? You must have established some sort of terminology.

Susan: A hug.

Brün: What?

Susan: (stubborn) A hug.

Brün: What about a “phrase”?"?

Susan: No no, I’m trying to avoid that kind of terminology.
Sullivan: Would you be willing to try it once using a different image, which is “pacing”?
Lesley: Yes.
Sullivan: An eighth-note is a step, anything longer than that—rests, for instance—are where you pause before you take a step. It would be like this:
(Sullivan tries to walk it and illustrate what he just said.)
I can’t do it moving the double-bass too. The idea is that during a pause you are waiting to move.
(Lesley plays measures 9-10.)
Don’t make it rushed.
Lesley: Yeah, I didn’t pause long enough.
Sullivan: You didn’t let enough time pass before you finally went down the last bit.
(Sullivan sings what he’s talking about.)
Lesley: Ok.
Enslin: You look very carefully around before you take that last step.
Sullivan: (still singing) Bahh.
Lesley: Yeah.
Enslin: And then you change your mind and take a step in the other direction.
Arun: You do it too soon, you’ll get hit by a car.
(Lesley plays:)

Lesley: (discouraged) Then I don’t know where to step next.
It changes direction every note.
Sullivan: Well, I could hear that. I don’t know if the rest of you could.

Assessing self-referential rehearsals

Susan: Can we assess the way we’ve been rehearsing: where someone presents an image or metaphor, and then we rehearse using the metaphor’s terminology? Any criticism?
Sullivan: Can we make positive comments also?
Enslin: I’d like to make a critique of what we did in relation to what you invited us to do. We didn’t do much describing of what was played. That was a component that didn’t get much emphasis.
Lesley: You mean describing what we heard after we played?
Enslin: Yeah.
Sullivan: Once we decided what to do it became talk about how to do that, not describing what we heard.
Susan: Is it usual that players can hear themselves when they’re playing?
(general pause, chuckles)
Arun: It depends on who you’re talking to.

Susan: For myself, I’m so intent on executing something that I can’t hear the results.
Sullivan: Me too. I listen in order to hear my relationship to somebody, but I can’t pay attention to—
Lesley: For me, listening while playing something is analog to peripheral vision. I catch only the larger, significant movements, not the details.
Arun: So perhaps we might have to have someone, not a player, come in just to listen at rehearsals?
(later in the rehearsal)
Susan: I worry about the amount of playing in relation to the speaking.
Sullivan: Too much playing?
(everyone laughs)
Susan: No, not enough playing.
Sullivan: How do you decide how much is enough?
Lesley: How I decide is when I’m sure I have been able to execute an instruction and do it consistently before taking on another instruction.
Sullivan: I agree with that. I can only do that once I’ve understood the instruction. So for me the time of talking is determined first by how long it takes me to get the instruction.
Enslin: I disagree. A description has to be articulated in such a way that the performer thinks he understands it, and plays, rather than working out in detail all the places where there will be a performance decision.
Sullivan: I didn’t mean “working out in detail all the places where there’ll be a performance decision.”
Enslin: What did you mean?
Sullivan: I meant, more along the lines of what Susan said when she mentioned that it took her a while to get the image such that she thought she could do something.
Susan: (agreeing) umm hmmm.
Sullivan: It has to do with the first part of what you said, when you mentioned that someone has to think she gets enough of the metaphor to be able to play: that would determine the necessary amount of time to talk. Then she could say, “Ok, let’s try it” and could hold all the other talk for later—especially the talk about whether it would work or not.
Enslin: Ok, I agree.
Arun: I think what Enslin said before holds: we haven’t put much emphasis on hearing each other play and then saying what we heard in terms of the image under discussion.
Enslin: There’s something I want to bring up here. If someone does try to play according to a metaphor and finds that the playing doesn’t do what the description or describer wanted, then there has to be a new metaphor tried—the metaphor has to be changed, or revised, rather than explained.
(the others grunt)
Susan: Well, that’s dangerous, though. We would have to be switching from metaphor to metaphor.

Enslin: Yeah, that’s desirable.

Lesley: But how would we know whether we’re at the point when we haven’t yet found a way to play the image, or whether we’re at the point when the image or metaphor has to be changed? Because it took me a while simply to understand what Sullivan was talking about with “guy wires”, and then I was interested in trying it.

Sullivan: Also, I never spoke of explaining the metaphor. I meant there has to be enough time and talk given so that the metaphor is understood enough to be an orientation.

Enslin: However, a lot of time was given to further explanation of the metaphor. Someone played and then there were further specifications of the metaphor.

Arun: So we have to find a way to use the metaphor in order to orient the playing, rather than use the playing to go into further excursions about the metaphor.

**Standard versus Orientation**

Enslin: Right. I think if we were more flexible regarding the metaphor, we might listen more to the playing. The metaphor, if I understand Susan right, was to function as an orientation, not as a standard.

Lesley: That’s why you said that if the playing doesn’t do what the description wanted, then the metaphor has to be changed.

Enslin: Yeah.

Susan: *(dubiously)* I don’t know about this “changing metaphor”, Enslin. I’m going to have to go home and think about it.

Lesley: What’s good about a metaphor is that it guides without totally proscribing or prescribing the activity.

Arun: I noticed that yesterday, when Sullivan gave us that image of all of our entrances stacking up on each other, I had a purpose beyond just playing my entrance right—

Susan: *(mumbles)* Trying to play something “right” always intimidates me.

Arun: —so when you said “Let’s stack our entrances”, I really wanted to stack my entrance, and so I ended up playing right.

Sullivan: Also one thing I liked about this way of rehearsing was that it got me to look for relationships in the score, and to stop asking “what does this mean?” or “what am I supposed to do here?” I think as an assignment, the “self-referential rehearsal procedures” get the performer to start looking for relationships on which to build a metaphor.

Enslin: *(more mumbling)* Well maybe this way of rehearsing is time efficient, after all. Even though we spend a lot of time talking about the metaphor, the players seem to get more mileage per measure when they consult a metaphor, than when they don’t.

Lesley: Parenti is brewing herself. What did you say?

Susan: See, I worry about the criticism that in this way of rehearsing, too much time is spent in just aimless babbling.

Enslin: —rather than the usual way of spending too much time in aimless playing.

Susan: Well, not everybody sees it that way.

Lesley: After all, when the lights go down, what we perform is the music, and not our talking about it.

Arun: Is that what you think, or are you quoting?

Lesley: I’m not sure. I’m going to have to go home and think about it.

Susan: After the first rehearsal last week when we first spoke of the “reach” metaphor, Herbert said “Well, it went pretty well.” I told him that I wasn’t sure about the “reach” metaphor really being the right one for the piece. He then said “Don’t worry. It doesn’t matter what image: if you have an image, and you have an idea, that’s the important thing because it gets the players familiar with the music, and that’s the function of the metaphor.” And then he said “I’m going to have to go home and think about this self-referential rehearsal idea, because I don’t really know what it means.” *(Susan giggles, then sighs)*
Rehearsal Six

in which dismissals and clichés are introduced as a possible realm for rehearsal instructions; how to counteract slander is discussed; the syntax “the piece tells me…” is scrutinized; the Axes to Grind are discussed; consistency and variety are pursued.

Going from the language of listeners to instructions for performance

Susan: Today I thought I’d try my most ambitious notion of what a “self-referential rehearsal” could be. I thought we could, here in this rehearsal, refer to the language of listeners, and see if that language would tell us anything about how to perform and rehearse the piece.

Arun: You mean anything that listeners say?

Susan: Yes. Listeners have a store of language that belongs to what music has been. When a listener applies that language to a particular piece she’s hearing—and particularly, to a piece of new music—that language ends up not distinguishing the piece, but rather dismissing it.

Enslin: That listener would probably only say about Lesley’s piece “Yck, that piece sure doesn’t have a good beat—it stinks.”

(A small noise from Lesley)

Enslin: The first dismissal I thought of in looking at this piece was that it seemed to be all in eighth-notes, and it seems not to deviate from having an underlying eighth-note pulse. So I initially dismissed it as music which didn’t vary its subdividing pulse. I think that it’s probably wrong, but that would be one possible starting point.

Susan: If you get that dismissal in your head, would it give you some image of how to play the piece? Either to oppose that description, or confirm it?

Enslin: I would look for those places where the way this piece is constructed confounds the notion that it is just—(here Enslin pounds on the table in quick eighth-note pulse)—eighth-notes hammering. I’d try to make something of those moments where it interrupts the sense of the eighth-notes.

Susan: Is there any such place?

(All look through the music.)

Lesley: The beginning is one such place. There’s nothing that really comes in eighth-notes until measure 6.

Susan: But isn’t there a difficulty with what you’re saying, because just that which is evidence against the eighth-note-ness, occurs at a time when nobody knows that there’s an eighth-note-ness to have anything against it. It’s the beginning of the piece.

Sullivan: There might be a way to play the beginning so that when the eighth-notes come, it’s difficult to pin them down as eighth-notes. That would involve creating different pulses. We could treat those initial long durations as if they were a pulse, so that when the eighth-notes come somebody wouldn’t know what their subdivisions are.

Arun: Another way we could address this description is on the last page where we are trying to show the different groupings of eighth-notes so that someone listening wouldn’t want to tap always two eighth-notes, but would be seduced into tapping three, or not know what to tap at all.

Susan: (to Enslin) Is there a more usually-found dismissal of a piece? What you’re saying, Enslin, is not a commonly-heard dismissal—someone wouldn’t say after a concert, “Oh, this piece just has lots of eighth-notes.” What do they say?
Counter-acting slander

Sullivan: I thought we are making the performance of Lesley’s piece so that we can be witnesses of it. That we want to say certain things in response to dismissals, and back-up from that by trying to make a performance that would allow us to attack dismissals the way we want. So the performance is to be a reference for which we can be witnesses.

Susan: So we’d have to speak up in the name of this performance?

Sullivan: Yeah.

Susan: Is what you’re saying, then, that all we can really do is—oh why does “all” sound so puny?—no, it’s a lot. So all we can really do is later speak in the name of what we attempted to show?

Sullivan: Instead of saying “all we can do”, say “we can do it all if—”

Susan: (who didn’t understand this) Ok, yeah. Is it possible that the performance itself can’t counteract a dismissal; that it is only the speakers for that performance who can?

(Silence.)

Brün: (from under a bush) —can’t what?

Sullivan: (loudly) COUNTERACT.

Brün: That, I understood. But then—?

Susan: That it’s only the speakers who can later say, “See what we do.”

Brün: Aha, I understand.

Susan: I guess what I’m asking is: is it a dead-end to try to think that from the slanders that are said about new music—which are preventing people from hearing—

Brün: (interrupts) You can only deprive slander of evidence; you can’t stop slander.

Susan: But can you get from the slander some rehearsal instruction?

Brün: Sure. The only instruction that you can get, when you know the slander, is to make it a lie and to not, by mistake, make it a correct report. So if you know that people talk about eighth-notes, then you have to understand that all your differentiation has to be built on other parameters because the eighth-note is not at your disposal.

Susan: Aha.

Brün: And that, I think was done in these rehearsals, and rather successfully too.

Susan: Yeah? Tell me where.

Brün: The beat function disappeared the moment you had larger phrases. It became only the limbs of the phrase and no longer the beat of the background.

Susan: Maybe that was why Lesley was irritated when I would count out in eighth-notes.

Brün: Sure. If you would conduct the piece in four, for instance, you would be able to get a much stronger feeling of the differentiations available to the sub-beat.

Susan: Maybe I’m just beating a dead horse, but I’d like to continue what we’re doing from a different angle. When I hear a piece, I sometimes wonder whether the language which comes to my mind while listening (and a not particularly distinguishing language, either) arose because that was what the piece was trying to address, or reflect on. For example, when I heard Sam Magrill play Brün’s Piano Sonata, I kept thinking, involuntarily, how the first movement sounded so “automaton-like”—I asked myself whether this was not just a stupid description, but could be a part of an area of controversy which that movement wanted to address. Something like an “elective affinity”. So I wonder whether—

The syntax “The piece tells me” is scrutinized

Lesley: Susan, you said—

Sullivan: Let her finish.

Susan: I guess I’m wondering if from that language, we can glean performance instructions. Ok, go ‘head, Lesley.

Lesley: Oh well, it’s off the mark, what I was going to say. Sullivan: No, say it.

Lesley: (clears throat) Ok, well I seem to have an allergy to the syntax “the piece wants me to address such-and-such”, or “the piece tells me how to speak of it”. It seems to belong to the language of objectivity, where people say “the piece moved me”, “the piece affected me”.

Susan: That’s good—that’s right on the mark. Hmmm, let’s see: should I continue to use the syntax that “the piece tells me”? Does the piece “tell” me things?

Brün: The composer does, as well as he can, or she. But you have not much at your disposal: the composer usually does not know how to speak, and the piece doesn’t say. So, then it must be you. I think the nearest was when you, Susan, asked: what is going to be said about the piece that you don’t want said about it, or, if it is said about it, should not be correct.

Susan: But you’re going from the zone of the audience, whom we know does speak, to—
Lesley: Does it mean that I try throwing some sentences to
Brün: Lesley, if I say it tells me without asking anybody—
Lesley: Yeah.
Susan: So you're speaking of the piece being consistent with—
Lesley: I don't know what it means to "let the piece speak to me".
Brün: Ahhh.
Lesley: Does it mean that I try throwing some sentences to the piece and then see whether, if I try to follow that description through, whether it actually matches or where the piece doesn't seem to fit that description, or...
Susan: Wait, is that a criticism of me?
Sullivan: No, I say they both have a bad side.

The Axe to Grind

Lesley: Herbert, you're also doing something else, which is a-priori to the rehearsal. You have certain axes to grind when you come into a rehearsal situation.

Brün: Indeed, namely, the anticipation of the slander which I want to counteract.

Susan: What has that got to do with anything at the moment?
Brün: If you don't want to be a coach then—

Sullivan: Now which axe are you grinding?

Brün: I—actually I'm cooperating. I want to show that the allergy is well-founded, what Lesley said. And that the attempt to break this allergy is well-founded. And that we haven't yet found the way to get through this syntactic dilemma, that's all. But instead of sitting around, I tell you what to do, and I tell you it will also get applause for the piece when you perform it my way, and you can play it my way and you will feel very well while you play it! And so I promise you all the goods in the world—

(general accumulating laughter)

Brün: —and I do it—
Lesley: Let's hire him.
Brün: —and where do I get it from? What do I have to say if I want to tell you the history of my convictions?
Sullivan: If you can find how to play it, you still have to find how to say it.

Arun: It’s a legitimate problem, Susan. I do this with my guitar students—what Herbert does—because I want them to discern from the information that a composer has written down, what alternatives they have as performers. Where does the piece invite them to make choices...

(responding to looks from the others) Yeah, I know the piece doesn’t really invite or really tell you, but I don’t want them to go to the other end, which they’ve learned from rock guitar music, which is that they can play whatever they want.

Lesley: So it’s a situation where the language is missing.

(silence.)

The question “How can I, with the utmost consistency, derive the highest variety?” is pursued

Brün: You can say “The piece permits this parsing, and permits that phrasing, and permits...”, etc. What does the piece permit if I approach it with the question, “How can I, with the utmost consistency, derive the highest variety?” I look for places in the piece which would orient a consistency of performance of a highly varied composition.

Lesley: Wait—why do you bring “variety” into this discussion?

Brün: Because otherwise if I only do something which I can do all the time, I play the eighth-notes. And then I am utterly consistent, with no variety. The trick is to find in each composition that consistency which does not damage its variety.

Susan: But what’s that got to do with what I’m trying to investigate?—having a stupid sentence about the piece in my head, and then consulting that as a possible resource for performance instructions? Why do you bring in consistency and variety?

Brün: Because that’s the way to bring something in against this stupid sentence. If you’re asking for something you should understand when you get an answer. In order to counteract stupid sentences you have to find the greatest consistency for the greatest variety.

Susan: You mean, 46 different interpretations?

Brün: Ach! NO! That interpretation in which consistency generates variety, instead of ironing out variety; and where it is not obedient to the most regular, but where it is consistently finding the retroactive correction. It should be consistent, it should not be arbitrarily difficult, and it should have a reason. For example, when I detect motives in a piece: the idea of a motive is an argument for particular behaviors of a performer.

Enslin: That’s good, in that most of the dismissals and things she’s talking about are sentences which wiped out any profile in the piece and any changes in the piece. To say “This piece is just all eighth-notes” or “This is mechanism, automaton-type music”—all these are sentences which wipe out the variety of a piece.
Partial Bibliography


—. “The Limits of Togetherness.” Paper.


