The specific qualities of Bob Perelman's recent work can be seen if it is contrasted with that of another leading "language poet", Bruce Andrews, and both their work is relevant to the project of Pages. A series of texts like Andrews' "I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up", brilliantly witty and at once evasive and precise, makes the reader feel what it is like to be a slightly helpless, if amused, receiver of the messages-cum-commodities of late twentieth century world capitalism: "We are not a country, appease your skin with fantasy bags - turds would be strawberries to prisoners ...." (Reality Studios 8) As Gilbert Adair says in his review of Andrews' Give Em Enough Rope this kind of linguistic over-determination is "a capitulation to the overproduction of message, commodity and rhythm in the consumerist urban environment, which nevertheless resists that by coupling quantity with the quality of each linguistic item." (Reality Studios 10) This is a fine defence of Andrews' strategies, possibly a more sensitive approach than Barrett Watten's attacks on Andrews' "totalising forms" (in North Dakota Quarterly Fall 87); and may indeed temper Perelman's own objection that many of his contemporaries' language-writing provides "large supplies of surplus meaning (which) has little political effect". (80 Langton Street Residence Program 1982) Coming back to Adair's terms, does it "ape and contest the shit-machine" of capitalism or does it merely ape? I'll leave that question open. Certainly Watten has a point about the invariant nature of the Andrews series (though I've yet to see them all); we need to feel that we're
getting somewhere in this overproduction, not just bogged down in the shit, whatever the quality of the units. Indeterminacy can begin to seem relentlessly determined; as Adair put it in Pages (68): "Cutting across formations categorised as discrete, 'discontinuity' is so only if it makes other relations; or else it is mimesis of actual informational chaos."

In more ordinary terms, Perelman doesn't show us what a thing is like, he attempts to tell us (or have a narrator tell us) about it and, as every creative writing class knows, this is a heresy against the dictum, "Don't tell, show" - and a useful heresy since telling seems to preclude indeterminacy (except in the long text "Holes in the Argument"). What Perelman's texts tell us (to ignore the humour and satire) is what the post-structuralist critique has been telling us, not without internal contradictions, for some time (now available in marketable "Readers..." and "Guides to..."; who can afford the originals? An ironical question about knowledge and capital that would not be missed by Perelman). In many of the poems in Face Value, the subject ("I") who is theoretically totally constructed by social forces and rendered absent by its language and its psychology, is ironically pushed centre-stage (though where, or what, is the stage?) to soliloquize on his or her mess and in the process seems a little like "you and me" with our "seven basic plots". Economics, though, is often the basis of existential choices that are not choices at all: "It was either a new car or staying home and shopping with baby. So it was back to teaching kindergarten."

The only condition is one of either informed or bemused questioning. "The Family of Man" (a title that nods, via Barthes, towards vanished claims for human universality) trumps up a good question or two:

Hey I know one: The proper study of mankind is what?
Why is there money, Daddy? And why is there daddy, Money?...
Guns are made of what? Food is made of what?
Or aren't these the right questions?
Why did Odysseus lose all his men and then kill two hundred more when he got home? To stay human?

A retreat from humanism might suggest an answer to that last question might lie within the realm of therapeutic psychology. But a
fast food metaphor ("next patient please" it seems to say) puts any answer squarely within the realm of the social and economic, of man, diminished again, this time to consumer-units of production:

All this is psychology, private hamburger. Cows are real, and customers standing in line, ground into units of managed time encased in money, minutes waiting to spend themselves.

These forces provide the social narrative that animates these poems and our consumer society if only we can realize it; our epic concerns not Odysseus but the interconnection of these forces, fronted by the absurdity of Star Trek or whatever it happens to be. The actual story won't matter so long as it hides its connections like a commodity hiding its production:

There's a moon tonight (one narrative fits all), and private property patches together a network of dreaming citizens.

I could go on, indeed want to go on, quoting. But what is significant about this extraordinary satire? It is possible to argue the superiority of Andrews' radical categorical, grammatical and narrative re-structuring over this poetry of statement. What particularly bothers me is the question of the affirmative function of art, that which elevates the reader into the co-productive energy of the text. Does Perelman preclude that? Can it only be achieved by radical formalism? It is perhaps all too easy to fall into the smug cynicism of so-called "deconstructive" thought. Try reading Lacan (if you can afford the book) while the recalcitrant child who refuses to be potty-trained shits on the floor! Do you really feel like a totally determined subjectivity or just a relatively autonomous one when a random stone shatters the windscreen? Perelman's texts belong in the ambivalent helplessness of such sudden absurdities which puncture the pat cynicism

where the softly cubed contours of the schoolrooms shout, IN GOD WE TRUST, capitalized, which you'd better not be too cynical about, says the small print, when you go to buy a car or a can of beer.
It is precisely this extraordinary wit (who reads the small print on a bank note?) that makes Face Value so significant, along with Perelman's ability to state connections between systems of signification quicker than theory, and to shift between them effortlessly though convincingly, and with a stronger sense of how contradictions pattern the real. His shifting rhetoric - an important term for Perelman - offers a polished satirical resistance to the social narrative which slips through it, with the grammar of metalingual analysis or argument as structure ("If ... then .... So ... Thus ....").

Robert Sheppard
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AGE

The horrors are coming up the back road behind the barn the old trees skirting McDowell's meadow and tornado warnings following last night's floods are issued fires hurricanes bombs general disaster and illnesses of all order seem rampant hide in bed with nothing showing not even the long resident person adjacent looking out at you still seems other than foreign you fall so into the vast vortex of it all clutched bedclothes breathings creaks of elderly boards your own bones final betrayal.
Have I bricked up unbricked what perspective hole break of eye seen what glowing place what flower so close grows from a tiny brown seed or was it what I wanted this after imaged green round sun faints under blue sky or outer space that place no one knows but for this echo of sketched in color the stems of the voluptuous flowers patient myself inside looking still out.
There is a shadow to intention a place it comes through and is itself each stasis of its mindedness explicit walled into semblance it is a seemingly living place it wants it fades it comes and goes it puts a yellow flower in a pot in a circle and looks.
CHAIN

Had they told you, you were "four or more cells joined end to end," the Latin, catena, "a chain," the loop, the running leap to actual heaven spills at my stunned feet, pours out the imprisoning threads of genesis, oh light beaded necklace, chain round my neck, my inexorably bound birth, the sweet closed curve of fading life?

Robert Creeley
Ian Davidson's No Passage Landward is a solo debut of great freshness and charm. Written in North Wales, these poems are criss-crossed by the linguistic and political tensions of that region, yet also evidence a willingness to admit any source of imagery or language that might drift their way. He runs Neighbours and news bulletin hostage dramas breathlessly on through the minutiae of domestic and working life; and on again into a rural and industrial landscape shaped and scarred by the imperatives of distant money, with a sliding syntax that catches at the heart and the intelligence.

These poems are constructed at the limit of the poet's ability or inclination to construct. Last lines often leave them slightly ajar, supplying the notion but not the fact of closure. At its most successful this strategy leaves the reader with exactly the right amount of work still to do; elsewhere stanzas flap and slam like a series of shed doors in a high wind. But even here we catch sight of some exciting jumble.

All of Ian's poems are attractively unforced; the best of them, like Half Stoat Half Weasel, achieve an ease and certainty of line break and run on, a sense of effortless, complex mapping which recalls Raworth or O'Hara:

'when the head's spun through three sixty and the foundation three feet deep a baby man and little boy we wrap up and slap down the cat's lap we're a river or something a floating object we can't credit looms and coils'

The garrulous shade of Ted Berrigan also lurks somewhere in their undergrowth, staggering around a disused slate quarry perhaps, wondering whether he can get hold of any sulphate in Bangor. But Ian Davidson's poems begin to achieve what they do by striving to become completely what they are; what he is learning from the greats is not to imitate but to beat his own path, to stay open to the play of language and the information of the world, to the 'precious details of a daily fight'.

John Muckle