Managing *The Manager*

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Critical Essays on Richard Berengarten's Book-length Poem

Edited by

Paul Scott Derrick and Sean Rys

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Editorial note: Since both editors are American, our contributors a mixture of nationalities and our target audience international, we have taken the decision not to unify orthography, punctuation and usage in this volume. Each essay is presented here in the style that its author originally chose to employ.

FOREWORD

RICHARD BERENGARTEN AND *THE MANAGER*: A PERSONAL AND HISTORICAL NOTE

ANTHONY RUDOLF

"I'm not speaking to you about things past, I'm speaking about love"
George Seferis

I have been privileged to read most if not all of Richard's books in manuscript. He is a prolific and eloquent, sometimes exalted, writer, and remarkably generous in his hospitality to intelligent critique of his drafts. If the point is well made, it is well taken. Guest and host, as he likes to say, are the same word in some languages. Magnanimity is the watchword. And this key to quality is always combined with another: his attentiveness to detail. For Richard, the small and the big pictures are always dialectically inter-related: the large, patterned, architectonic structure and the intricate micro-design of each component *stanza*.

As readers of each other's work, we complement one another. Formally speaking, our major overlap is the numbered sequence, whether prose, verse or prose poem. For this reason, among many others, how could I not love *The Manager*? It is perhaps ironic that this text, so English in the preoccupations embedded in its narrative, draws for its infrastructure and formal discipline on the French *verset*, the verse paragraph, as practised for example by Saint-John Perse. The *verset* sets Berengarten free to take the line for a walk, in the phrase of Paul Klee.

For all the lucidity and depth of his prose, poetry is at the centre of his being, which makes him at once unassailable and vulnerable. He and I live in different existential worlds. These days, I am mainly a writer of prose, more reserved in tone and austere in prosody than Richard. I occasionally trick myself into producing a poem on the cusp of other work. Berengarten, by contrast, is here to make poems, with prose arriving from time to time on the circumference of his *imaginaire*.

In the late 1990s, I attempted to find an English publisher for *The Manager*, but even with the help of the distinguished London literary agent and writer Giles Gordon, I failed—that is, until I approached an editor outside the mainstream, David Elliott, who called in the designer Brad Thompson. In order to take the book on, they paired up to start a new publishing house, whose inaugural title it was—in 2001. It is, however, significant that the very first publication of the work appeared as early as 1990 and in translation, in former Yugoslavia, just before that country's collapse. Serbia is one of several countries (mainly in southern Europe, especially Italy, Greece and Spain—as well as China) where Berengarten is considered a major poet.

In 2017, the French journal *Nu(e)* published an entire 160-page French language issue devoted to the writings of Richard Berengarten, including translated extracts from *The Manager* and one essay from the present work—the first time any Anglophone poet had received such attention in its pages; while, in the same year, three of these essays were published by the leading English-language online magazine, *Fortnightly Review*. As for the original English edition, David Elliott's belief in the book manifested itself in his exceptional sleeve-notes and careful choice of cover photograph, which, in its portrayal of commuters hurrying across London Bridge, subtly echoed *The Waste Land*, a significant influence on the book. Thompson's fine design and typography perfectly matched his publishing partner's intentions. Since then, *The Manager* has appeared in two further English editions: Salt in 2008, and the current one from Shearsman in 2011.

Berengarten started writing *The Manager* in 1979. The book's political and social aspects now appear premonitory—in a world of globalised economy, fake news and social media run amuck. Mention should also be made here of Berengarten's influences. He has read deeply in linguistics, studying the codes of language hidden and revealed and, closely associated with that, the deep and surface structures of society as explored by sociologists, psychologists and political scientists. Among the poets and novelists in, on or around the premises, and even the premisses, are T. S. Eliot, George Seferis, W. S. Graham, Allen Ginsberg, Doris Lessing, Ezra Pound and James Joyce. And among theorists, Zygmunt Bauman, whose comments appear on the cover and sleeve of all three editions, as well as Marshall McLuhan, Noam Chomsky, Wilhelm Reich, Simone de Beauvoir, and the ancient authors of the *I Ching*.

The latest turn in the long publishing and critical history of *The Manager* is the present book of critical essays, where this major work now comes to rest or, better, unrest. In recent years, the book has finally attracted the attention of critics and writers. This significant collection of essays sets

out many and various pathways into the book. No reader of the essays will be coming new to *The Manager*, that goes without saying. All of us will re-read it with deeper understanding than before, which is a precondition of deeper love.

INTRODUCTION: (*ENTER* INCIPIENT MAN)

PAUL SCOTT DERRICK

> Must we wring the neck of a certain system to stuff it into a contemporary pigeon-hole, or modify the dimensions of that pigeon-hole for the satisfaction of the analogy-mongers? Literary criticism is not bookkeeping.
>
> Samuel Beckett, *Our Exagmination* (6)

One of the aims of this collection of essays is to demonstrate that *The Manager* cannot happily be stuffed into any contemporary critical pigeon-hole. Nor is it, by a very long stretch, the editors' intention to wring the book's neck. Young as he was when he wrote these words, Samuel Beckett was right: "Literary criticism is not bookkeeping". If we thought that it were, we would probably have been defeated by the same complex of insidious forces that almost defeat (and destroy) Charles Bruno.

In many ways *The Manager* is unique within Richard Berengarten's *oeuvre*. Although he tends to construct poetic sequences—such as *Black Light*, his homage to Greece and the work of George Seferis, or *In a Time of Drought*, his celebration of Balkan culture and tradition—Berengarten has on no other occasion published a book-length sequence that employs the recourse of the verse-paragraph, nor one that deals with a comparable subject matter: the peculiar and arguably grotesque modes of thinking, speaking and believing of the fauna inhabiting the corporate and financial environments of late-20th-century England.

There have been three editions of *The Manager*. The first one was published by Elliot & Thompson in 2001. The second was published by Salt in 2008 and the third one by Shearsman in 2011. Since no one of them can be considered definitive—there may be others yet to come—we have decided to let our contributors work with whichever edition they prefer. Each essay includes the edition used in its bibliography.

It should be noted though that Berengarten made a number of changes in the text of the 2008 edition. Most of these have to do with the ordering of the sections. For those who may be interested, the order of Sections Seven

and Eight, Eighteen and Nineteen and Fifty-Six and Fifty-Eight is reversed in the second edition. There are, additionally, three more points in the text where sections have been rearranged: Sections Thirty-Three through Thirty-Nine, Sections Sixty-Four through Sixty-Nine and Sections Ninety-Five through Ninety-Seven. And finally, the short glossary of foreign words at the end of the first edition is replaced in the second by a one-page postscript in which the author provides some background information on the poem's composition and several pages of notes on the text. There are no significant changes in the ordering of the sections or in the notes between the second and third editions.

Whether these changes lead to noteworthy alterations in the overall reading of *The Manager* is an intriguing question that none of our contributors has chosen to address. This could be an interesting issue for future commentators on the poem to deal with.[1]

~ ~ ~

Until now there have been relatively few critical studies of *The Manager*. *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, published in 2011, contains three essays that specifically deal with the book. Angus Calder's "A Spectacular Variety of Registers" (233-39) discusses the broad panorama of voices the poem contains. Manana Gelashvili and Temur Kobakhidze consider the ambiguous presence of T. S. Eliot in the poem in "*The Manager*: Tradition and the Individual Talent" (240-50). And Patrick Query offers a consideration of Berengarten's use of the verse-paragraph as a vehicle of meaning in "Form and Redemption in *The Manager*" (251-58, and reprinted here). In addition, Chris Hamilton-Emery provides an informative summary of the poem's extended composition and its publishing history in his Preface to the 2008 edition (ix-xvii).[2]

All of these earlier studies constitute a solid base that the present volume rests upon.

We have arranged the essays here in what we hope will be a coherent order—from the public and social to the private and intimate.

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[1] It should also be noted that Sections Thirty-Four (So that she flits) and Thirty-Nine (Tonight she's in bed) in the 2001 edition become Sections Thirty-Five and Thirty-Eight, respectively, in the 2008 edition. And among the minor textual differences in the second edition, the stanza breaks have been changed in those sections entitled "Sir, since the living", "In the parks and among the flowering gardens" and "This is a petition".

[2] For some early reviews of *The Manager* see Gery, Hooker (2003), Moses, Stern and Treitel.

The book begins, therefore, with an approach to *The Manager* through what its author calls a socio-political lens. Anthony Walton's "Disorganization Man" places the poem in the context of various business models that were in vogue in the culture at the time of its composition. Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*, as well as John F. Welch's radical management style in the 1980s form the background for a discussion of the forces leading to the collapse of Charles Bruno's life and the terms of his redemption.

After that, Tyrone Williams offers an insightful comparison of *The Manager* with Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. Juxtaposing a fictional world in which almost nothing is under control with a poetic one in which almost everything contrives to mimic control, Williams portrays *The Manager* as a postmodern analogue to the modernist novel in decay.

In another unexpected move, Mike Barrett links *The Manager* to several ideas of Jung, Heidegger and Roman Jakobson as a prelude to an original approach to the poem's discourse. His essay focuses on how Berengarten manages to transcend the human tendency to inertia and the power of ideology that pull us toward indifference, forces that are encompassed in the Russian term "byt".

Next comes an essay that deals with the very rich cornucopia of speech acts, dialects, conversation and languages that make up this book-length poem and considers its ambiguous relationship with the modernist aesthetics of Eliot. A. Robert Lee reads the poem as a complex riposte to the voices that reverberate through *The Waste Land*. How does it respond, react, echo, call back to Eliot? And how does Berengarten's choral recall expand the sense of his modernist predecessors? Lee addresses these questions, and others.

This process of responding to and modifying modernist aesthetics suggests a historical dynamic that might be associated with theories of the Postmodern, and this is why we have placed Patrick Query and Manana Gelashvili's essays in the following slots. Query discusses the ways in which form creates meaning in *The Manager*, reading it as post-modern long poem in which the poet responds to a sense of obligation to find order in the midst of confusion. Gelashvili, delving further into post-modern aesthetics, investigates the approaches to time and history in *The Manager*. The theoretical framework here is provided by the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope, which refers to a shortening of our common-sense perceptions of time caused by a lack of interest in the past and low expectations for the future.

In a similar vein, Sean Rys offers a reading of the poem based on its various strategies of fracturing chronological time. Referring to concepts

developed by Heidegger, Barthes and Bachelard, among others, Rys argues that the collapse of the traditional timeline into asyndetic time reflects the break-down of Bruno's life. But he also argues that the poem composes a new kind of pattern of movement, or transformation, which in turn reflects the reconstitution of the protagonist's integrity.

And finally, Kay Young argues that one of the keys to the success of *The Manager* is Berengarten's creation of what she calls a "zone of intersubjectivity". In a close reading of Section Eighty-Four, she elucidates a crossing-over between the reader and the poem through which we share in the protagonist's thoughts and hopes and witness how they are transformed over time.

~ ~ ~

The rich variety of creative and stimulating readings of *The Manager* that we offer here should be enough to convince any disbelievers that this carefully constructed vehicle of language is roomy and powerful enough to transport a generous aggregation of passengers. It was written—or accumulated—slowly, the main period of composition spanning the years between 1978 and 2000. This dating will inevitably link the book in many readers' minds with that very slippery term (or set of slippery concepts), Postmodernism.

It's a term that appears quite often in these pages, but there are many other terms and sets of concepts here that can aid us in understanding and appreciating *The Manager*. Literary criticism is not bookkeeping, as Beckett pointed out, and *The Manager* cannot be accounted for by stuffing it into any particular pre-existing critical pigeon-hole. Rather than applying terms derived from theory-driven criticism, I'd prefer to appeal to terms that derive directly from human experience, terms like *despair, resistance*, *endurance* and *renewal*.

One thing is clear about *The Manager*: it chronicles a crack-up. And the reasons for that crack-up have to do with the growing spiritual void at the center of modern life. But if the book were only that—if it were only a portrait, no matter how brilliant, of defeat and the collapse of both personal and collective integrity—it might have complied with many of the demands of contemporary theories, but it would not comply with Richard Berengarten's vision of human potential.

Charles Bruno's break-down, and the complex social forces that are responsible for it, occupy a large part of the poem, but they are only half of the story. The other half of the story is the way he pulls himself together again.

It is probably true that no work of art can be completely pessimistic. One must harbor at least an iota of hope to go to the trouble of creating an object for other eyes to contemplate and other minds to ponder. Far from being a pessimist, Berengarten has never allowed his work to fall into the trap of negativity.

And in its own way, each essay in this volume gives witness to the positive "turn" in Bruno's life trajectory. He does, after all, identify himself in Section Thirty as *Homo aspirans*. He may gradually come to totter on the brink of disintegration, but he ultimately manages to find his way back from that chasm (which is always there) and discover the entry into Hope Street and the possibility of renewal and reintegration.

Berengarten has always been aware that poetic form is an essential transmitter of sense. His inventive mastery of form in every book he writes is one of the strongest components of his artistry. So it should be no surprise that he chose the verse-paragraph here to transmit the burgeoning volumes of all kinds of noise in a late capitalistic society. He describes it as "a prosodic unit of great strength and flexibility, well-suited to the cadences and varied registers of modern English and to the particular demands made by a long poem" (2011: 161).

This is the form that this particular poem had to have. It seamlessly accommodates the myriad voices, languages and non-verbal sound effects that come and go through the text, which, in turn, reflect and express the overload of sensory input and data, both useless and useful, to which we are constantly subjected. We may do well to think about this sensory overload inherent to our time and place as a later and more extreme manifestation of the flux and disorder in the world that Robert Frost believed it was one of the missions of poetry to hold at bay.

When he wrote *The Manager*, Berengarten probably wasn't thinking of his work in Frostian terms as "one step backward taken"—from disorder, or decay, to order—but it is. Because the verse-paragraph does more than just offer an elegant access to the mess of contemporary life. This constantly repeated stanza form also resists it. In his 1961 interview with Tom F. Driver, Beckett talked at length about the tension between form and chaos in contemporary art and confessed his belief that art (as defined by formal control) could no longer credibly resist the pressure of the chaos of modern experience. On this essential point, he clearly disagreed with Frost. In order to be true to life, art would have to adopt a different relationship with experience:

> What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is

> something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. […] To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now. (qtd. in Driver: 23)

What Beckett was describing in 1961 was his own paradoxical art of failure: his (anti)ambition to create an (anti)art-form that only aspires to be a shambles. Beginning with *Watt*, in 1944, both his characters and his form do, in a multitude of ways, fall to bits. In a very real sense, Beckett's work is a culmination of the drive toward fragmentation that began, at least overtly, with the earliest Modernists. They wanted to give us cues that our previous conceptual frameworks for interpreting and understanding the world were no longer adequate and that we needed to revise or renew those frameworks in order to continue to be a viable part of the world. Modernist fragmentation represents a deconstruction of our assumptions about ourselves and our relation to the world whose purpose is to encourage us to reconstruct the fragments, reconstitute the frameworks, into something new.

But the time has come for artists to transcend fragmentation and offer us formulas for putting the world together again.[3] This is what *The Manager* does. It channels the mess of modern urban life through its form; but that determined form, which fuses prose and stanzaic regularity, at the same time disciplines or controls its content. As Patrick Query nicely expresses it:

> Every section of *The Manager* owns its form, maintains it securely, at any cost, never surrendering to the tendency toward dissolution that its material is always calling up. Virtually every thematic element of *The Manager* is contingent, shifting, negotiable, ungovernable. The form, though, is never negotiable, and from that tension emerges the special genius of the poem; and this is why Berengarten may be said to have written, against impossible odds, a great poem of hope. (253-4)

Meaning in form: the verse-paragraph provides a consistent (maybe even reliable) background against and through which the morally and vitally erosive modes of modern existence rumble and crash. But the stanza form stays whole; and so, in the end, does Bruno. This in my opinion is one of the deepest layers of the book. We are meant to understand that Bruno's gift for hope had always been a part of his character, even though it is temporarily closed out by his exposure to the cult of money and the greed

[3] Perhaps this is why Berengarten describes the poem as a "kaleidoscopic composition made up of separate parts of contemporary life" (Berengarten and Limburg: 46). His stress on "composition" suggests that he intends to avoid what the Modernists would almost certainly have thought of as collage, the essence of which is fragmentation.

for money's power. Section Seventeen (in all three editions) recalls a moment in Bruno's childhood when he already wondered what it would be like to be dead. It may be precocious to think about death at such an early age, but it's probably even more precocious to resist it so strongly:

> *What would it be like, to be dead. To be not here, or anywhere. Simply not to be here. How inconceivable, how totally terrifying. How very weird and strange.* And even then you'd thought, *How consoling, to be*
>
> *Nothing. To drift off, like snow. Into the snow-kingdom. Away, into sleep. Or just to melt, to un-be.* When a voice inside you welled, from some stiller, deeper space: *But not ever to have been born? And never*
>
> *To have seen this? Not to have stood on this ground or breathed this airy air?* Well It's Oh Sir No Sir No Sir No. This will not do for me. I want. I want to. I mustn't. I won't. I was not made for death. I just *refuse* to die.

In the largest sense, as this passage indicates, *The Manager* deals with the two-way pull between Eros and Thanatos—the forces that favor life and the forces that favor death. Like all of us, Bruno is caught between those forces in a world where the ones that favor death appear to be in the ascendancy. Yet he finally refuses to allow his humanity (that voice that comes from a stiller, deeper space) to be usurped.[4] This is why his learning to love, and everything that human capacity implies, is so important.

As several essays here point out, there is a religious dimension in Bruno's turn toward renewal. The nature of that dimension deserves careful critical attention. In addition to *Homo aspirans*, Bruno also thinks of himself at various points in the text as Adam Kadmon.[5] The author points out in a note to Section Forty-Five that Adam Kadmon is a "Kabbalistic title for the first man, conceived as a representation or microcosm of the power of the entire universe" (2011: 165).

Jeremy Hooker has been very illuminating with respect to this dimension of the book. There is a key passage near the end, in Section

[4] It is almost certainly a coincidence—but an interesting one—that the speaker of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is also caught in a moment of indecision between the gravity of death and the conflicting pull of life. Both speakers wistfully dream of drifting away into the snow, but both also resist the urge to escape and reaffirm the will to live.

[5] The references appear in Sections Forty-Five, Forty-Eight and Seventy-Four.

Ninety-Two, in which the narrator (who must at this point be understood to have fused together with the poet[6]) thinks about Ezra Pound, the old man who said "I cannot make it cohere", only to try to convince himself that "it" —the world and our conceptions of it—does. "Aye old man," the narrative voice continues,

> through thick and thin, the world
>
> Sticks together right loyally. […]
>
> Although pain be endless
>
> This seedling on my windowsill turns constantly towards the light. Its green movement be blessed. And weightless the light's true quality. There is order in being.

It is clear where Berengarten places himself in the endless struggle between Eros and Thanatos, or order and chaos, or love and money, or sense and senselessness.

Reflecting on this passage, Hooker writes:

> The words of the speaker in *The Manager* refer to an original condition, known both in childhood and in the divine creation. Berengarten's thinking, strongly influenced by Lurianic Kabbalah […] relates to a catastrophic fragmentation of original order, which joined man and woman to God and the world. Faced with a condition of brokenness affecting all aspects of life, the object of human creativity is restorative. […] The poet shares with the musician the aim of creative transformation, to reveal "matter" in its true glory. Experiencing fragmentation in his own life and culture, he seeks to make whole. (69-70)

But I do not want to convey a simplistic image of Bruno's, or Berengarten's, hard-earned (though limited) optimism. Immediately after affirming the "order in being", the narrative voice finishes Section Ninety-Two with this rather less expansive admission:

> I wish I could grasp it forever, this glory the real world inflects. I lose it then find it then lose it. It will not come ever again like this. Ever.

We do have access to the order and glory of the world. But it can only be

[6] Notice that *Bruno* is almost an exact anagram of *Burns*.

sporadic and temporary—which is to say (and to echo Frost), a temporary stay against confusion.

I am not, therefore, suggesting that the consistent background provided by the verse-paragraph is meant to imply a belief that some consistent or reliable texture of values beyond human agency is there. As I said above, the religious dimension of *The Manager* deserves to be carefully pondered and cannot be explained away with worn-out formulas. I would however suggest that it implies that a consistent or reliable texture of values which is the *result* of human agency can be there. And this is an important difference. One of the many things *The Manager* is telling us is that our survival may depend on how we manage to process the exponentially growing torrents of information stimuli—including human interaction mediated through technology—that bombard us every day, on whether we learn to filter out the useful from the useless, the authentic from the inauthentic, the benign from the malignant. Charles Bruno does, and in so doing rescues his integrity and finds within himself at least the potential for recovering a wholeness lost.

> Elsewhere for the drowning. For those floundering on reefs, those self-buried in sand, those swallowed by the sea's lips, and those
>
> Already in the belly of the cancerous destroyer. I declare myself unpruned, not docked for final judgement. For I have scarcely set out.
>
> Have far too much yet to do. Have not proved myself, even anything. And have not surrendered – nor shall abandon – History. (2011: 154)

Homo aspirans, Adam Kadmon: by the end of the book, he just might possibly have learned how to channel the power of the universe and become an "Incipient man". You and I should be so lucky.

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DISORGANIZATION MAN

ANTHONY WALTON

The time is fast going by for the great personal or individual achievement of any one man standing alone […]. *And the time is coming when all great things will be done by that type of cooperation in which each man performs the function for which he is best suited, each man preserves his individuality and is supreme in his particular function, and each man at the same time loses none of his originality and proper personal initiative, and yet is controlled by and must work harmoniously with many other men.*

Frederick Winslow Taylor
The Principles of Scientific Management (140-141)

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

William Blake

In the fall of 1982, my college roommate began his first professional job as a chemical engineer at General Electric. At the time it seemed the most uneventful of beginnings, another of my college friends venturing into what we called the real world, finding work at a big corporation; though this also seemed a certain coup, as GE was the most robust and stable of blue chip companies. He would be able to learn his trade, assume greater degrees of responsibility, and over time be paid adequately to support his dream of providing a solid upper-middle class foundation for a large family.

In fact, my friend had stepped, without knowing it, straight into an epochal shift in corporate management technique and practice. General Electric, just the previous year, had hired a new chief executive, unknown to all but company insiders: John F. "Jack" Welch. Over the next two decades Welch would become world-famous and would implement ways of managing large corporations that would change the way in which almost all institutions in the United States, Europe, and eventually the world were

governed.

Welch's innovations would include severe engineering- and math-based "rationalizations" of every possible work process: the relentless application of computer business systems and a ruthless and unforgiving financial pressure and control placed on all aspects of the corporation, including the demand for unending cost-saving and profit increases and the ultimatum that all GE business units be number one or number two in their respective fields or face sale or closure. As I watched my friend's career unfold, moving from plant to plant within GE, then to Allied Signal to find a more humane work environment (though this company was then promptly purchased by the rapidly expanding GE) and Boston Scientific, I began to understand that I, a writer and academic, was witnessing something new. I did not yet understand that this was the culmination of a century-long revolution in the perception of what work was and how it should be performed.

At the same time, a writing professor of mine had begun composing a book-length poem that would evolve into a more than two-decades-long project, a poem that would help define his career and would ultimately have an uncanny confluence with my roommate's difficult career path. Richard Berengarten (then Burns) was writing a poem that would delineate and give a sense of the human cost of not only the new way of doing business in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, but also of an entirely new way of seeing the world. It is a poetic accomplishment that I believe will only loom larger as time passes and we come to understand just what has happened in our corporations, hospitals, universities, and in fact, in almost every institution at every level of society across the globe.

~ ~ ~

It has been posited by Francis Jones, among others, that Berengarten's *The Manager* is a great poem of the Thatcher period of English history: "The protagonist of *The Manager* […] despite being both product and victim of a superficially British every-man-for-himself late-Thatcherism, is also the European Everyman" (Jones 287). To extend and build upon this insight, it can also be said that Berengarten has written a great poem of "Welch-ism," that revolution in business and finance that first took hold in the U.S. during the early 1980s, as well as of "Taylorism," the earlier theory and practice of scientific management upon which Welch-ism was built. As mentioned above, Welch-ism can be defined as the never-ending rationalization, automation and financialization of all processes within a given organization. These streamlined and accelerated work processes contributed to the

massive technological innovations of the late 20th century and so to the overabundance of material goods, information, and opportunity (for travel, sex and economic accumulation) of today's postmodern era. Berengarten, in his tracking of Charles Bruno's loss of self, has explored the psychic effects of this post-Welch, postmodern overabundance, and the incorporation of important contemporary ideas of "the saturated self," to use a term coined by social psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen. *The Manager* uniquely illustrates, through its examination of both the work and personal realities of today's world, why so many citizens of the West (and increasingly of Asia) feel overwhelmed in their professional and private lives, at times to the point of despair.

Early in the poem, we learn that the protagonist, Bruno, has recently been promoted or "moved up. Fresh blood just what's wanted and so much the better if you're making a bit of a go at it" (10). But rather than excitement, what Bruno seems to feel in his new middle-management position is frustration, if not disgust:

> How I piss myself off. Being so polite to them. The Directors and Deputy-Directors. The Customers Clients End-Users. The Strategists Tacticians Negotiators. (14)

His list of work positions continues for three full stanzas:

> […] The Specialists and Expert Consultants. The Marketers and Marketeers. The Banker-Member-Racketeers. The Arbitrators and Advisers and Researchers and Developers. (14)

This kind of work-place specialization (along with its wealth of titles) was born of the innovations of the engineer and industrial theorist Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915), who declared, "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first" (7). Taylor's system is principally built around the idea of "rationalization," or the mathematically-defined pursuit of efficiency in every single process by eliminating every possible "unnecessary" worker and piece of equipment. It distills the activities of any office or factory (with the exception of the very highest management jobs) into small enough steps—with highly focused designations and titles—that the necessary work could be performed by any individual. Rather than being reliant on the talents (and cooperation) of creative thinkers or craftsmen who were independent and able to perform a variety of skilled functions, labor could be arranged in simple enough portions that *anyone* could do the work.

These are the "Admen and the Admin-Men," as Bruno complains, "Who with almost no exception see themselves as // Models of Efficiency" (14). Bruno feels the increasing pressure of Welch-ism as work processes around the globe continue to be rationalized and accelerated:

> […] all these Paladins of Global Bullshit have to keep haring around faster faster faster in order not to collapse not sink not drown on the spot. As if the whole world were a quagmire they were shit-scared of getting muddied in. (14)

This new workplace clearly does not, in Bruno's experience, lead to Taylor's idealistically theorized "development of each man to his greatest efficiency and prosperity" (140).

Richard Ellsworth, a professor of management at Claremont Graduate School, offers this insight into why a middle manager's career can be so disheartening:

> Welch has created a cadre of professionals and […] has told them that GE will make them better professionals, more marketable professionals, and has subjected them to intense pressures to perform. But he has not given them a sense of loyalty to the organization, to some higher goal of the organization. He is still hammering away at being number one, competing and winning, but what he may not realize is that the message to managers is "look out for yourself, win at any cost, do whatever you have to do". (Lowe 168)

Bruno's ongoing complaints echo this sense of a hollow core. He describes his colleagues as psychically lobotomized:

> […] All carrying on non-stop
>
> As if the top halves of their heads were permanently sliced off. All behaving as if Pure Dosh were the Total Be-All and End-All. Like Hey You Guys I Mean. We All Have The Right. To Survive. Make Ends Meet. (14-15)

He groups himself with them when he comments, "But why are they – or we – All such arseholes?" (15).

Bruno, like most middle managers who have identified with the top, seems surprised to find himself under so much pressure:

> My name? *Homo aspirans.* Incipient man. With warts on my hands. As I drive in and out of this city. And from one city to another. Across dangerous deserts between fixed appointments. Wildernesses between known addresses. Mined No Man's

> Lands between filling stations.
>
> If I go on at this rate I'm going to bust a gut. (46)

But this is the new world, the new corporation, and he is expected to produce or accede to his own mortality. Even as he endures mounting work pressure, he is aware that he is replaceable, one part of a fragmented whole with nothing unique to contribute. Sitting in a management meeting, he thinks: "Whatever needs saying will get said by someone or other. Sooner or later. I very much doubt whether it will ever be me" (73).

~ ~ ~

Bruno's work life is one driving force of his disaffection and disintegration; it is the transfiguring force he struggles against in his search for redemption. But there are other, equally significant strands of postmodern life at work in *The Manager*. While Bruno experiences effacement in his profession, the society he lives in is also undergoing a seismic shift in terms of the amount of information and the sheer number of choices the individual psyche is subject to and responsible for. The business revolutions of Taylor and Welch and the constantly humming machines and technological innovations that followed have created a consumerist culture, a proliferation of labels, and an overabundance of opportunity that Bruno struggles to manage in his personal and emotional lives.

This wealth of goods and opportunity at first seems comforting on a personal level to Bruno. In an early love poem to his wife, he marvels at "[o]ur evenings together" as a kind of "economic miracle" (8). The couple watches television on Sunday nights, "a one-way window that never opens," showing a great range of programs including

> […] Songs of Praise (which this week
> comes to us beamed down from the parish of Bishop's Cleaving
>
> With a final five-minute appeal for the Distressed Mortgage Holder's Fund […]

a show about African life "state subsidized for our educational benefit," and

> […] our favourite Late-Night Classic, The Sabbatarian Spinechiller,
> timed to prime us with suitably resonant nightmares
>
> For the onset of our workweek. (8)

This variety of pre-packaged experience readily available for viewing in the living room seems to offer a kind of liberation not only from work but also from the burdens of the self—more specifically, the Romantic view of the self as defined by social psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen, "one that attributes to each person characteristics of personal depth: passion, soul, creativity, and moral fiber" (6). Bruno almost gleefully states that with television's offerings so neatly packaged "for our regular Emotional feastings monitored by digital watch, who needs Freud, needs Guilt" (8).

But when society's abundant goods and labels (which Berengarten at times highlights through his use of capital letters) next present themselves in the previously-mentioned section (Eight) of Bruno's early work complaints—"The Directors and Deputy-Directors. The Customers Clients End-Users" (14)—it is with a more ominous tone, and this tone continues in Section Twelve, depicting the Topsett real estate prospectus. With the increased salary of his new managerial position, Bruno seems to consider "moving up" to a new neighborhood, one the prospectus touts as offering "Self-Ownership With A Difference." Topsett's "Residences" are advertised as being "uniquely and individually styled" (21). But as the document continues, we see how much of it is boilerplate, containing the same language common throughout the real estate business and, it's implied in Topsett's sale of "Self-Ownership," the same *dreams* common to all:

> […] both pastoral and metropolitan benefits […] guaranteed to meet the widest variety of specialist and day-to-day requirements ranging from super pied-à-terre penthouses, studios and condominiums for enterprising singles
>
> **To 4- and 5-bedroomed homes** both detached and semi with spaciously enclosed private gardens front and rear. (21)

The prospectus concludes with a daunting list of security precautions—"CCTV burglarproof monitoring system including wall-to-wall emergency search-beams wired to your own internal alarm panel"—and of "unambiguously worded notices" placed throughout the property to discourage outsiders—"Private **Keep Out No Entry No Parking** Reserved for Residents Only Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted Guard Dogs Patrol These Grounds" (21-22). This intense focus on security speaks not just to what is walled out of Topsett, but even more to what is walled *in,* a pervasive fear that is in itself a kind of confinement for the families huddled inside these narrowly-defined dreams.

Labels and jargon shape not only Bruno's work and home life, but also most of his interpersonal relationships. His conversation at a bar with an acquaintance early in the poem consists almost entirely of ad-speak and platitudes: "Try one of these antacids. New stuff. Swiss or German. Take two each night // Regularly mind. Works wonders you know" is followed closely by "Wilkie's not a bad stick. […] Always on time with his orders // And always sticks by the book" (10). Even the consolations he offers to a friend in marriage trouble—a man whose wife Bruno also happens to be sleeping with—become mired in jargon and cliché. In one of the most personal of conversations, in the coded confidences shared between men, intimacy has been evacuated by readymade language:

> You are a true blue brick Tony and she knows which side her bread's buttered on. […]
>
> […] As she dreams of your large lawn and studies double-glazing. Well indeed you both manage
>
> Mortgage estate and marriage. Your joint account in Prospect National also comes in handy. As does your Maplan Policy.
>
> Providing her shelf of *huiles* and *crèmes* in recently pink tiled bathroom. With perfect patterned matching suite
>
> Of shower bidet and vanity cabinet.
>
> […]
>
> No she will never leave you. One hundred percent reliable. You've invested well there boy. (38)

This kind of fragmenting and crossing of vocabularies—the interweaving of the personal with the impersonal and even commonplace jargon—is tied by Kenneth J. Gergen directly to the sheer abundance of experiences afforded the individual by recent technological innovations. Cell phones, TV, omnipresent advertising, and the internet "saturate us with the voices of humankind—both harmonious and alien" (6). These pervasive voices don't just *affect* the self, they overwhelm it such that "[t]he center fails to hold" (7). Gergen uses the term "vocabularies of the self" to track the history of this profoundly disruptive shift: from the 19th century romantic self of "depth […] and moral fiber," the twentieth century witnessed a move towards a "modernist worldview" in which "the chief characteristics of the self reside not in the domain of depth, but rather in our

ability to reason—in our beliefs, opinions, and conscious intentions" (6). This modernist stance is where Bruno seems to begin his journey at the outset of the poem, freed from a Romantic's "Guilt" and with his seemingly rational and reasoned purposes of "moving up" in his work life and living situation.

But Bruno in fact exists at the crossroads of the modern and the postmodern, and his every attempt at self-starting towards a rational goal seems to devolve into disarray. "Social saturation," notes Gergen, "furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become part of us and we of them" (6). Bruno's dreams and experiences are not only his own but also those he's viewed on TV, overheard in airport waiting rooms, and read about in marketing brochures or online. And amidst his constant busyness, he begins to suspect and question the omnipresent jargon shaping his work, his interpersonal relationships, and his very self-conception:

> Hello. Hello. Are you there. Is that really you. What is the good of the traffic
>
> The rushing to urgent meetings. The mortgages and bank loans. The research and the investments. The trees blossoming and fruiting. The in-tray and the out.
>
> The percentages and bids. The train journeys to and from work. The car journeys to and from home. The gossip liaisons secrets. Mowing the growing grass.
>
> The records signatures messages. The wavelengths and vibrations. (80)

Bruno's fragmented musings enact—and relay—Gergen's "incoherent and unrelated languages of the self," a cacophonous polyphony. A work memo is directly followed by a personal (though jargon-filled) conversation, a conversation with a lover, a real estate prospectus. These alternating modes occur throughout, acting out Berengarten's intention, as he commented in an interview about the poem, "to present a kaleidoscopic composition made up of many apparently separate parts of contemporary life" (Limburg: 46). This "kaleidoscope" could be seen as dazzling and liberating for the individuals who now have the freedom to explore and move between such varied realms of experience—but instead, Bruno (like many of us who live within this postmodern abundance) increasingly finds it confining, even deadening. We are, as Gergen writes, "pull[ed] […] in myriad directions, invit[ed] […] to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from