ıted in the streets, and by out-
ıe Communists and Socialists, won
abused—to represent Germany. But
t. And partly by shouting.
hinks that if Israel fails—it seems to
ed—George Steiner will as least have
o my own words, will have nothing.
er off than I am. Perhaps. But here I
my thinking. If Israel fails, the very
y of meaning. Hitler, as I wrote, will
rhaps Professor Finch did not get my
him. Every tragedy, we are told, has
nciliation. After the tragedy of the
d to living by the state of Israel. Let
oe back with the Holocaust in all its
if not reduced to word games, *à la*
powers to give our lives back to us.
lost.

Tom Clark

"STALIN AS LINGUIST"

"To write poetry now, even on current events, means to withdraw into the ivory tower. It's as though one were practicing the art of filigree. There is something eccentric, cranky, obtuse about it. Such poetry is like the castaway's note in the bottle."

Though it's been almost forty-five years since Bertolt Brecht made that statement, it has never been more applicable than at present; poets have never seemed more "eccentric, cranky, obtuse," their poems never fuller of the consummate irrelevance implied by Brecht's phrase, "the art of filigree." In what is obviously an extremely fragmented time for society at large as well as for the special interests of literature, the arts have entered a phase of extreme "pluralization"—as Ron Silliman, editor of the new "language poetry" anthology, *In The American Tree*,[1] calls it. All thoughts of truth or beauty or *quality* in writing are to be considered either nostalgic or plain reactionary, or so Silliman implies. "Any debate over who is, or is not a better writer," he decrees in his introduction, "is, for the most part, a surrogate social struggle."

The guidebooks to this brave new world beyond the who's-a-better-writer debate are starting to roll off not only the small presses—among which the "language" movement has already implanted itself—but those of some of America's universities as well. In recent years Southern Illinois University Press has issued some of the principal documents of this movement, including Barrett Watten's volume of critical essays (*Total Syntax*) and Bob Perelman's collection of those shadowboxing, self-qualifying "talks" which are this group's dominant mode of production (*Writing/Talks*). Now, from the University of Maine's National Poetry Foundation, comes this six-hundred-odd-page blockbuster anthology, a volume that registers the movement's literary performance to date.

The "language school," as this group is often called (in honor of L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E, a magazine Silliman terms "the first American journal of poetics by and for poets"), has its stronghold in

1. *In The American Tree*, edited by Ron Silliman. National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine at Orono, Maine.

the San Francisco Bay Area, where its major movers (including Watten, Silliman, Perelman, and Lyn Hejinian) are based. There is also a New York branch, whose most prominent poet is Charles Bernstein. While there is a certain diversity of style among all these writers *as* writers, they display a surprising unanimity of purpose as evidenced in the critical writings and statements which take up a good one-third of *In The American Tree*. As avant-garde movements go, this one has exhibited a rare degree of cohesiveness (if not coherence). Silliman, in his introduction, traces the beginnings of the movement back to 1971, when Watten, as cofounder with Robert Grenier of *This* magazine, proclaimed a departure from the "speech-based poetics" of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, and suggested a move toward a new, "non-referential" procedure, which would build poems not from "images, not voice, not characters or plot," [but] "only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself." This anthology, Silliman says, "documents what became of that suggestion."

This new non-referential "axis" (as Silliman calls it) proposed a "public discourse on poetics" to replace the disorder and confusion of avant-garde poetic generations immediately prior to it—the Beats, the Black Mountain "projectivists," the New York School. All of those were represented in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (1960), and Silliman draws a bead on that anthology here, as though it were a principal obstacle in the path of his movement. According to him, there was one major problem with all of them: their failure to produce enough "criticism."

The language school writers will never be guilty of *that*. They are as long on critical theory as they are (relatively, and I think also absolutely) short on poems. Their criticism is mostly written in a pretentious intellectual *argot* that sounds a little like an assistant professor who took a wrong turn on the way to the Derrida Cookout and ended up at the poetry reading. What poetry they do write is mostly an odd alloy of the methodology of all that critical prose and the models of their "disorderly" literary predecessors. The voices of Creeley and John Ashbery, to name two powerful influences, are clearly audible in the background of some of the better poems here—Creeley behind Robert Grenier's, say, and Ashbery behind Charles Bernstein's. Another kind of voice, more constructivist than expressionist in its origins, can be heard in the work of Watten and Silliman, who base their writings on programmatic principles of composition. But the poets in all these strains share a reflexive quality, and their work has a tendency to talk about itself, sometimes in a language reminiscent of technical manuals, as in Watten's poem "Position":

The apex settles on

Tones in surrounding heads.
A test case, or
exile. No wires account for
failure of specific response.
A triangle gives,
circles branch out. Forced

Exposure to limit distorts . . . .

Watten's critical prose, also amply represented here, deploys the same kind of institutional-gray vocabulary to only slightly different ends. In his prose Watten seems to owe a debt to the distancing and disjunction methods of the Russian Formalists, especially Viktor Shklovsky. His interest in Shklovsky reflects the leftist stance that's common among language school writers. One critic, Fred Pollack, has suggested that "language-school leftism is either stupid or disingenuous, the icing on a cake only bourgeois intellectuals can afford." Indeed, solidarity among the language school cadres is expressed not in bomb-throwing or plotting the overthrow of the state but in tactics like letter-writing campaigns, such as the one Watten orchestrated when I criticized his work in *Poetry Flash* recently.

To give some background: My first foray into criticism of the language school was in a January 1985 San Francisco *Chronicle* review of Watten's *Total Syntax*, wherein I took issue with, among other things, his terminology (Watten seems unable to get to the end of a sentence without tripping over an "obscured referent" or "grammatical completion" along the way), and suggested such writing was "the kind of mumbo jumbo you'd hear from a guy who stumbled into a linguistics lecture one day, and walked out an instant expert the next." The *Chronicle* received a storm of angry letters from Watten's allies, including one from his erstwhile Ph.D. adviser, who called me a "reactionary frump." That same letter-writer, a well-known University of California linguistics professor named George Lakoff, also produced an article later the same year for the local poetry periodical *Poetry Flash*. Titled "On Whose Authority?", the article's central point was that "language" writers had seized back

(from "outside" critics) the "authority" to "characterize" their own work (in their "talks," statements, manifestoes, etc.). To Lakoff these writers were acting not like your average yuppified literary careerists (whom they resembled to some "outsiders") but like revolutionary "workers" who'd "taken over the factory."

Anyway, the editors of *Poetry Flash* must have felt a little anxious about Lakoff's article, because they asked me to write a response. (This assignment, Watten later suggested, amounted to my being "used" as a "bad-guy figure" by the devious and cunning *Flash* editors.) My response was called "Stalin As Linguist." The title was taken from a passage in Watten's poem, "Progress." The passage read: "One way contradictory use is to / Specify empty. / Basis, its / Cover operates under insist on, / Delineate. Stalin as a linguist . . . ". The title probably caused as much furor as the article itself.

Watten reacted by composing a two-page, single-spaced, indignant, "not-for-publication" communiqué to *Poetry Flash*. The letter demanded redress of grievances and threatened a boycott by advertisers. Attached was a list of people to receive copies. The list was almost as long as the letter itself. It contained the names of language school sympathizers with influential positions—institutional poetry administrators, reading coordinators, publishers, book distributors, bookstore owners and employees, university teachers, gallery representatives, etc. From these people and from others in the language school's local rank and file, *Poetry Flash* received a flood of letters. A selection appeared in subsequent issues of the paper. Several correspondents, such as Robert Gluck of the San Francisco State Poetry Center, charged me with "red-baiting." Joe McCarthy was evoked more than once, as were the "mau-maus" (by Silliman, though that letter never made it into print).

All of this suggests that despite its dedication to the *ideal* of criticism as equal in importance to creative work, the language school has a very thin skin when it comes to *taking* criticism. In the minds of Watten and other theorists of this movement—or at least in their pronunciamentos—the movement itself is nothing less than a forward surge of the great Hegelian dialectic of history. Any "outside" critic is forced into the role of reactionary. Hence the outraged tone of their plaints about "language-bashing." "Attacks have been made on this writing," Silliman says in his introduction. "No other current poetic tendency in America has been subjected to anything

like the constant flow of dismissals and exposes [sic], many of them composed in the threatened rhetoric of fury, as have the poets here."

Silliman attributes such "dismissals" and "exposes" to the anachronistic persistence of "a simple ego psychology" dependent on such outmoded bourgeois values as "communication" and "emotion"—thus setting the state for a familiar language school morality play: persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the right wing. Shortly after my *Poetry Flash* article appeared, a former director of the San Francisco State Poetry Center (this fellow made a name for himself locally by staging language school events) sent me a postcard with an x-rated cartoon on the front and a message that charged me, in no uncertain terms, with being "right in there weenie-to-weenie with Reagan and the Pope safeguarding those Western Judeo-Christian verities," and even of being in the "pay" of "the Vatican"!

It's been pointed out more than once that the tyranny of method over material in the language writers' work and of group unanimity over individual variation in their political strategizing add up to the very thing they pretend to abhor most, a sad authoritarianism. But who or what is on the left and who or what on the right? In the administered world of the present, as Theodor Adorno has said, "all works of art including radical ones have a conservative image, for they help reinforce the existence of a separate domain of spirit and culture whose practical impotence and complicity with the principle of unmitigated disaster are painfully evident." The phrase "including radical ones" points up the meaninglessness of current "left" vs. "right" arguments on aesthetic issues.

These writers' claim to social value is not that they are building a discourse but breaking one down. They have informed us repeatedly that they are "de-constructing" language, "defamiliarizing" it, even (as one "language" writer, David Melnick, has put it) "re-claiming the American language from the trash heap." If the corporate world and the media have given us an objectionable jargon, what the language school has managed to do isn't to deconstruct that jargon, but to substitute another jargon for it—one that's every bit as impenetrable by common sense. Much of their new anthology's critical prose is written in it (see Steve Benson's essay "For Change," with its anti-"outsider" rhetoric and smug insistence on the mechanical competency of his friends' writing: "apparent units within their works often function by apparently non-

programmatic and yet highly intentional juxtapositions . . . "). Unfortunately, the jargon also leaks over into the poetry, which comes out sounding a little like the drone of Hal the Computer in *2001*.

These writers have indeed, as Ron Silliman claims, rejected "speech" and thrown out the "speech-based" poetics of William Carlos Williams, but at what price? Williams's historic decision to base his writing on the spoken American language—paralleling Chaucer's decision to write in English instead of Latin or French, the "literary languages" of his time—was the great democratic gesture of poetry in this century, expanding its audience to fulfill the grandly inclusive aims of Walt Whitman. The language school has set out to draw back the perimeters of that audience, contracting poetry until it fits around only themselves.

Carl Pletsch

FREUD'S "SPECIMEN D

Like nearly every great write
Freud was consciously creating a mythi
early age. This involved no particular du
"autobiographical life" for his own
posterity—patterning his life upon the
Romantic genius in order to structure an
energies. Constructing his mythical life fo
biographers and later generations,
autobiography in advance, as he lived it.

The mythic Freud has played as im
tific Freud in the psychoanalytic movem
intellectual life generally. In fact, it may b
the mythic from the scientific Freud. O
gested that the myth of Freud as introspe
Freud's credibility as a scientist and fro
ability of psychoanalysis. There is, how
consistent or unscientific in a mythi
achievements of a scientific genius, excep
the genius itself. Virtually all the giants of
mythologized. Since the middle of the eig
category of the genius was itself invented,
tists (as well as artists, political leaders a
become almost automatic. The canonizati
feature of modern culture. The degree to
tific hero-geniuses have been integrated i
has varied from one discipline to anothe
psychoanalyst, a personal relationship
hero/genius seems inescapable. In fact, F
case of the mythical hero in science.

What is there about Freud's achieve
sonal attitude toward him as the founding
an inescapable dimension of this disciplin
from the fact that Freud united in a singl
new discourse or science (psychoanalysis)
own personality. In his writings, Freud
author, but often as the subject of investig