

# On Whose Authority?

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The open text, by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in the other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies . . . Reader and writer engage in a collaboration from which ideas and meanings are permitted to evolve. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive.

THIS PASSAGE FROM LYN HEJINIAN'S ESSAY, "The Rejection of Closure" is one of the many gems in Perelman's collection. It describes, clearly and directly, the most powerful impulse behind the movement in language poetry. The movement is not merely a negativist challenge to authority and control, but a positive demonstration that one can write with power, beauty, emotion, and intelligence—not in one mode but in an open-ended variety—without the crutch of authority or the banality of control.

This is a book of essays and talks by language poets, about what they do, what they think about, and what they care about—as poets: their own poetry, the poetry of others, their historical roots, their social role, their passions. There is nothing cutesy here, no isn't-poetry-wonderful, no talking down; just poets talking seriously to their peers about their deepest mutual concerns. It is one of a series of such books: *The L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E Book* (edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein), *Code of Signals* (edited by Michael Palmer), and *Total Syntax* (by Barrett Watten). The series, by now, is a genre.

The genre is about what the movement is about, just as Hejinian tells us in the quote above. It is about the rejection of authority and control, only here it is the authority and control of the critical establishment. Generations of poets have bitched about critics. But these poets have actually usurped the authority and control of the critics—before the critics have had a chance to notice or care. What they have done is to create a genre of discourse about poetry by the people who create the poetry. What future academics, when they get around to noticing some of the finest poetry of our time, will be able to claim a critic's authority over the collective efforts of the community of poets themselves—especially when it has been institutionalized as a genre? The workers have taken over a factory and converted it to serving the needs of their community. Their writings concern, in words of Michael Palmer, "that aspect of poetics that leads to the next poem." It is poetics whose job is to inform and to generate poetry.

What I especially like about this genre is that the poets, while creating such a poetics, don't stop being poets, even in the act of analysis and reflection. There is a great deal of poetry in the talks and essays. Even the editorial choices are a poet's choices. Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure" ends the book, providing just the right kind of closure, while rejecting closure in both form and content. Carla Harryman's "The Middle" is just where it ought to be—in the middle. Rae Armantrout's "Poetic Silence" is followed by Kit Robinson's "Song." It is not cutesy editing. It works. I enjoyed the book, was drawn into it, and found myself engaged by both passions and ideas.

Passions and ideas both: that is the power of the genre. The point is to usurp the role of critics while remaining poets. This poetic community is doing something that the mythology says can't be done. The dry critic's myth is that poets can't be thinkers; they can't be trusted to comprehend what they themselves and their cohorts are doing. The swashbuckling poet's myth is also that poets

can't be thinkers—and still remain real poets with real sex organs. It's the same myth from two different perspectives, and it's a self-serving myth. Who does it serve to say that passions and ideas cannot mix? Why, those with passions and no ideas and those with ideas and no passions.

The plain truth is that myth is false. Most of the really outstanding artists I've met—whether sculptors, or composers, or poets—have brains commensurate with their art. That should come as no surprise. Good artists aren't dopes. They read. They think. They talk to one another about ideas. They know what they are doing. And they know a lot more than that. It's about time that fact was institutionalized in a genre.

Enough generalities. Let's open the book and turn to "The Middle"—"where what's enlarged (subjective) and what's reduced (external) by speaking gather." Speaking makes the speaker larger, and the world smaller, while merging them. Poetry is the middle: it holds the middle ground and provides a means. But is there a single well-defined end?

Who limits herself to "All I can say. All I can say" gives herself over to a kind of conservatism.

Carla Harryman's prose poem raises most of the major issues in the book:

**Subject Matter:** What is subject matter, is it external or internal or the middle—the poem itself? What is the

reader's contribution to subject matter?

Meditation on depth: a wall covered with spots and I occupy myself by seeing faces in it, but not so that I can study the nature of an aspect but because I find those shapes interesting and because of the destiny that leads me from one to the next.

More and more, aspects dawn, others fade away and sometimes I 'stare blindly' at the wall . . . The more focus, the more narrative breaks, the more memories fade: the least meaning.

**Characterization:** How does a writer characterize things, people, situations? What kind of framing does a poem impose? What kind of characterizations is it open to?

Someone reads the picture as a working drawing and reads from what it represents.

**Framing:** Should there be one unified overall framing, or lots of partial ones, or no single one that is fixed or intended?

As she goes about her day to day, she doesn't care about the end. She lives with what's around her, and not with some big fate to be held up, compared to her *modus operandi*. Cinderella loved luxury, as would any dreamy floor scrubber. Exotics love evil, without families, on the fringe, with minds, and adventurers. Nature is luxury. Meaning is evil.

**Closure:** Should the content of the poem be closed or open? Can it be closed? If it is to be open, what structuring devices should be used?

*Whatever I say means some other things. What I say means more than what I am thinking.*

**Meaning:** What counts as an interpretation? What happens when one seeks an interpretation?

"The external does not have to be seen as a facade behind which mental powers are at work."

—Wittgenstein

Opening Pandora's Box neutralizes the power of the box. Everything is open to interpretation . . . Without depth, Freud is artifice. The icons decorating the psyche are scrapped for meaning. Meaning is bought to relieve pressure.

**Author:** What is the role of the author? How large should (can) she make herself in the poem? How much of her is the poem?

She gathers the grievances to her but changes their meanings, now when the words fall on her, knowing what she knows, seeing what she sees, talking from her mouth. And truly it matters little what she says, this, this, or that or any other thing

**History:** What is the role of historical and political context?

I didn't know that objects have histories. I thought they had an instant being, and that they were or were not intended for my use.

**Silence:** What does silence do?

BLANK

WALL

As in Wittgenstein, there is a wealth of ideas, a lot of diverse chunks, and a need for interpretation. But the flow is smooth, almost seamless, and the concerns and the skills are those of a consummate poet.

These issues recur throughout the book. They are not random issues. They arise from a theory about language—the most common theory in Western thought. The standard theory has several parts:

-Symbols (that is, words) are meaningless in themselves; they get their meaning via their reference to things in the world (either the real world or some possible world). They are thus able to *represent* reality. It is only via reference that meaning is possible.

-The conventions of language fix the meanings (in the above sense) of words and syntactic constructions. They thus fix the meanings of sentences.

-Communication consists in conveying to your addressee the conventionally fixed meanings of the sentences you speak or write. There are important consequences. If the words do not fit any syntactic construction of the language, then they cannot form a meaningful sentence. If communication is just conveying conventional meaning, putting fixed meanings into words, then the role of the reader is receptive: to comprehend the meanings of the sentences, to find out what the author intended to convey.

Let us call this the *referential* theory. It works for many basic kinds of situations—ordering a hamburger and the like—but in general it is a false theory, for reasons that I and many of my linguist colleagues have written about extensively. This inadequate theory has been imposed upon us (with the collusion of members of my own profession), often with harmful consequences. It has even been imposed upon poetry. In the romantic ideal, poetry was to serve an uplifting and healing function by communicating deep truths in especially charged, compact form. This ideal presupposes the referential theory of meaning and communication. It is a communicative ideal, and one that is still with us.

The language poets have correctly seen many of the limitations and fallacies of the referential theory. Meeting the romantic ideal of communication, they argue, is not what makes good poetry. That theory and that ideal have led to a lot of bad poetry. They have led to a situation where some of the best poetry of the century is overlooked or misinterpreted. And they have handcuffed contemporary writers. The point of the movement is to overthrow by positive force—by good writing of a sort that cannot possibly fit the referential theory and by a usurpation of the authority of the critical establishment. Language poetry is seen as a political act in the deepest sense, the reclaiming of the territory of language itself.

Here's how those concerns arise:

**Subject Matter:** If symbols get their meaning via reference to things in the world, then subject matter should always be the things referred to. Alan Bernheimer reviews the fallacy in this view in some detail, in a piece reminiscent of a Marx Brothers dialogue.

What is about? About is a preposition. It takes a noun. It takes a noun to know one. It takes a pronoun to pronounce one. But a preposition comes first. It puts a noun in an abstract relation—time, position, direction, possession—with some other word. But time, position, direction, possession don't say much about *about*. It must be very abstract. It has a little of position. The field is about the bull. Also, the bull is about the field somewhere. Be exact.

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Soft ball, medium soft ball, medium firm ball, firm ball, hard ball, solid ball, real hard, very hard, hardens, threads, soft crack, crack, crackles, cracks and hops, hairs, spins hairs, strings, snaps, breaks, and brittle.

The subject is candy making. The subject matter is sugar syrup.

Bernheimer takes us on a tour of kinds of subject matter. For Aristotle, the essence of *The Odyssey*—the overall plot—could be told in a paragraph. The rest was episodes. In *The Odyssey*, Bernheimer concludes, “the subject matter is episode.” What is the subject matter in travel writing, and in various works by Pasternak, Isherwood, Williams, Flaubert, Roussel, Stevens, Merrill Gilfillan, and Raymond Chandler? The answer is not generally the referential answer. The tour is fun and enlightening, and the moral is clear: an important part of what makes good writing good is that the subject matter is not what the words refer to. Language poetry forces that realization upon us; but it is true of good writing generally.

**Characterization and framing:** Bernheimer's candy making example brings up the framing issue. A frame is a conceptual organization that makes sense of some area of experience. Subject matter makes sense only relative to some frame. “Soft ball . . . soft crack . . . spins hairs” makes sense relative to a candy making frame. The linguist who has studied this the most is my colleague, Charles Fillmore, who has argued that word meaning and grammatical meaning in general is tied to framing. Framing and characterization are two sides of the same coin. Words evoke frames. In a recent trial in Boston in which a surgeon who performed an abortion was put on trial for murder, the abortee was alternatively referred to as the “baby” by the prosecution and the “fetus” by the defense. Framing in this case is characterization; the word comes along with a frame, which in turn can determine a verdict.

Framing has to do with the way people organize their experience. Suppose meaning had only to do with signifiers and signifieds, with the way symbols correspond to things in the external, mind-free world. Then framing could have nothing to do with meaning, since framing is in the mind, not in some mind-free objective world. The fact that framing is central to meaning is one of the irremediable problems with the referential theory. It is thus no accident that framing plays such a large role in language poetry.

Language poetry denies that meaning is in the words, that the reader is a mere decoding device whose job is just to figure out the author's intention and not to read anything of his own in. Language poetry requires an active reader whose job is to contribute, not merely to ‘respond’. One thing the reader must do is to supply his own framing. That is part of the pleasure and the interest, as it is in a murder mystery where one must try on successive framings and then discard them.

Framing becomes characterization when power is involved. It is Charles Bernstein's concern with political power that leads him to talk about characterization. The ability to characterize carries power with it. Someone who can characterize you has power over you.

. . . we are characterized insofar as we let ourselves be characterized . . . one can resist characterization by becoming conscious of its techniques and its inevitability. We live in a world which communicates by characterization, but we can resist its reification, its finalization, by understanding it as a provisional thing that exists in time for a particular use . . . If there is no escape from characterization, then one thing you can do is try to characterize the characterization . . .

One of the aims of Bernstein's poetry is to bring readers actively into the process of framing and characterizing.

. . . the class of sounds in the discourse creates a polyphony that interests me . . . it is the anxiety of indetermination that is of interest. The political dimension is not the opinion of any isolated sentence, but the experience of *hearing* the possibilities of truth and lies and in-between, and, as readers, *choosing*. Because to read is to choose: I just want to bring that process to the fore

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Much of politics is framing, as in Reagan's characterization of the contras as "freedom fighters" and of the SS as "victims of the war." Bernstein is aware of the political importance to bringing the process of framing into the open, and making readers both aware of their framing choices and responsible for those choices. That is one of the political dimensions of language poetry.

Authors have the power of characterization—or the power to cede it to readers. That is one reason why there is so much concern in this volume with the role of the author and with autobiography. "Author" and "authority" come from the same source. An author has authority simply by virtue of being an author. How an author uses that authority matters. Barrett Watten focuses on the author-authority issue in the later poems of Olson's *The Maxumus Poems*. Olson was a huge, towering man, who projected his size into his poems in various ways. One was by taking the name Maximus, despite having no real interest in the historical Maximus of Tyre. This began as interesting imposition of a historical frame that eventually took over the entire work and became boring. The reason was that authority itself became the central concern of the poetry. Instead of being just an author, Olson became an authority. His "uninterrupted statement," Watten argues, is a projection onto form of his overwhelming authority problem.

The issue arises again in autobiography. In autobiography, you are characterizing yourself. Michael Palmer discusses the mechanisms of self-characterization in autobiography and elsewhere, noticing that they are ubiquitous, from government press releases to other forms of advertisements for oneself.

What first interests me about Augustine is his concentration on phenomena such as memory, time, and discourse, that is, those elemental mechanisms and conventions which shape the text itself and are most often taken for granted, as if the categories so named were in fact given, in other words, understood and beyond question . . . the language of warfare—Vietnam would serve—or the financial pages of our daily newspaper . . .

The mechanisms of self-characterization are especially interesting to dwell on after reading Fanny Howe's "Artography." Here is a passage where she characterizes her own characterization.

The massive amount of revision I put the words through is only a way of absolving them from the taint of having passed through me at all. I want to abolish the personal, or hurl it to the furthest point; and polish the impersonal, until its dazzle unfocuses a complete clarity, as with everything good.

In a sense, this entire volume is an exercise in self-characterization by the language poets collectively. Interestingly enough, much of it is out in the open, as in the cases where poets interpret their own poems. It is interesting reading: Beverly Dahlen doing an extensive Freudian interpretation of a hauntingly beautiful passage from *A Reading* and Bob Perelman publicly debating with other poets ways of providing interpretations to his own works. It is a way of saying: I am the author, but I am not the final authority. I myself go through a process of interpretation. I need help (Dahlen openly acknowledges help in her interpretation), and I am willing to open the interpretation of my work up for discussion. It is one of many ways of achieving one of the central goals of language poetry—the breaking of the author-authority link.

But the ultimate ability of the poet to break the author-authority link must come in the poems themselves. How are poems to be given structure while still being kept open? Two of my favorite essays in the book address this question directly: Rae Armantrout's "Poetic Silence" and Lyn Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure." Armantrout presents a taxonomy of silences used by language poets, with examples from Hejinian, Perelman, Benson, Silliman, Seaton, Grenier, and her own work.

Suppose a writer wants to make room in her work for silence, for the experience of cessation; how is this accomplished?

1. She may end a line or a poem abruptly, unexpectedly, somehow short of resolution.
2. She may create extremely tenuous connections between parts of a poem.
3. She may deliberately create the effects of inconsequence.
4. She may make use of self-contradiction or retraction.
5. She may use obvious ellipsis.
6. She may use anything which places the existent in perceptible relation to the non-existent, the absent or outs outside.

Hejinian provides a taxonomy of devices for creating an open text that maintains poetic structure. They include: irregular distribution on the page, repetition and rearrangement, parallelism and montage. She works through numerous examples.

Dissimilar things, being made alike grammatically, become meaningful in common and jointly. There is a kind of synergetic development occurring as a result, whereby the meaning of one statement opens to that of another, the logical extension of which—the third term, so to speak—being in the hands of the reader, that is, out in the world . . . For me, a central activity of

poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens—makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear. While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things.

Language poetry requires the active participation of readers in the creation of meaning. It requires readers to impose framings, to find faces in the dots on the wall, and to take responsibility for the faces they find. It doesn't allow readers to operate as decoders looking for a meaning that someone else packed into the words. A reader who says "I don't get it. I don't know what this poem is about. What is the author trying to say?" is operating in terms of the referential theory. That entire view of what constitutes meaning and communication is being rejected—not for the sake of rejection itself, but for two very good reasons. First, it is a false view. What is great in great poetry is not its referential content. And in everyday discourse, one is constantly engaged in a negotiation of meaning—a cycle of framing, interpreting, and responding, often creating reference only by mutual interaction. Second, the referential theory is seen as an authoritarian view, one which allows authors to frame and characterize and which puts readers in the position of having to accept those framings and characterizations.

Language poetry should be viewed from the perspective of art. It is verbal art. It evokes, stimulates, raises issues, arouses passions and confusions and memories, without forcing anything on you. You don't have to get it. You are relieved of the job of receiver and decoder. You can indulge in reverie, let the poem evoke what it will, and participate actively. It is democratic discourse, anti-elitist; anyone can join.

Not everyone will want to. We have been raised to go on packaged literary tours, with author as guide and a rigid itinerary. You go where the author leads you, letting him make the choices. There is a pleasure in it. You can explore what's there. Discover hidden places. Some terrain is difficult, but there's a pleasure in trekking through it and seeing what less hardy travellers can't. But you don't have to build the castles and temples and palaces and cultures yourself. Moreover, it is not permitted. The meaning is there in the work. Foreigners can look all they want, but that's all. And who would want to anyway? That's not what literary tourism is about.

Language poetry provides an alternative to literary tourism. It requires you to take part in the building. Meaning isn't there, already finished, to be sought out and admired. You've got to join in on the construction crew. Just as you have to in life and in any meaningful discourse with another person. Open poetry is not meaningless

poetry. In any discourse, the language evokes and constrains meaning. In poetry, it evokes more. In language poetry, the language both evokes more and constrains less—but it still both evokes and constrains. As Hejinian says, describing the word strings of Jackson MacLow's chance-generated poems, "While word strings are permissive, they do not license a free-for-all."

There is nothing new about this, of course. Openness has always been part of what separates great writers from hacks. Nor is openness of *form* new. Most of a haiku is not what's in the words. It has no fixed meaning. Its role is to start you on a journey of your own. In linked verse, where a poem is never the product of a single poet, the form itself forces openness, while also demonstrating how the participating poets achieve it.

One of the goals of language poetry is to develop new open forms. The means is by a focus on language—all that it can do—rather than on fixed subject matter. The heroes of the movement are those who have done it in the past: Stein, Williams, Zukofsky, Creeley, etc. Ron Silliman's essay on Spicer shows how Spicer achieved such effects and why he should be on that list.

Spicer, through his line breaks, through his suppressed verbs as in "A drop/Or crash of water" . . . and through his numerous insertions of sentences apparently taken out of other discourses . . . achieves this turn to prose only through its destabilization. It is precisely in those nooks and crannies, gaps and lacunae that the outside, whatever it is, is finally permitted to speak . . . This is not to suggest that Jack Spicer was the first—I hesitate to use this term—language poet, nor even to suggest that his anticipation of such a writing should be ranked hierarchically against similar contributions made by Stein, Creeley, Zukofsky, Kerouac, Olson or Eigner. In fact Spicer, both as poet and linguist, rather aggressively disputed the valorization of language within the process of the poem.

Still the force of the essay is to show how Spicer functioned as language poets do.

Language poetry is enormously diverse: Eigner is sparse, Hejinian is flowing, Palmer is musical, Silliman takes the sentence as unit, Watten creates new forms constantly. The common denominator is not to be found in the specifics of form, nor (obviously) in content. The common denominator is a set of concerns and a method for addressing them. The concerns are those discussed in this book—subject matter, characterization, etc. The method of addressing them is by looking carefully at how language works and by using the knowledge gained to construct new open forms. One of the impulses behind all the theoretical discussions is discovery—discovery of how one can address  
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these concerns in concrete detail, how other poets have done it and how each other has done it.

These discussions serve still another purpose. The poetry itself (there are 80 to 90 volumes by the contributors listed on pp. 292-5) is the means by which openness of form is created. But the group is not concerned merely with openness of form. Openness of interpretation is equally important. Just as free citizens need to be able to create for themselves the meanings of events, so readers have to train themselves in framing what they read and noticing the frames. These discussions are part of that ongoing training.

Such theoretical essays, therefore, serve a number of purposes: to address a set of concerns in minute detail, to help one another learn how to achieve openness of both form and interpretation, and by that process, to expand the boundaries of poetry and to usurp the authority of the critical establishment. It's a worthwhile enterprise and I enjoy reading about it. □

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