

and Its

MEANING

Concepts
for the
Masses

The Language Movement is a social fiction forged by a group of innumerable, unnameable, and anonymous poets exalting in their numbers and celebrating in their words the collapse of meaning in the information age. The story of this movement sweeps up distinctions between a wide range of writers and brings to a head the tension between poetry and literary property. The warring thunder of this story is the implosion of collage collapsing on the legal, adjudicating subject of American poetry, laying the foreground for a new aesthetic of poetry as revolt against creative property. It is in light of the Language Movement's methods of composition—collage, cut-out, the found sentence, montage—that the collapse of meaning beneath an overly idealized layering of textural syntax can best be viewed as the collapse of the Language poet's intention.

The ideas informing the Language Movement's momentum can be seen as a preface, or footnote, to the poetry itself. It is a vast oversupply of concepts, more concerned with signs and semiotics than with semantics and meaning, that organizes the Language poets business practice in the poetry world, a practice entailing anything from public consumption and funding to university employment and instruction. On the whole, their gesturing and thinking ultimately get trapped in conceptual schemes which not only distort the way their poetry gets read, but also challenges the com-

And introduction to language-oriented writing and its relation to consumer society, semiotics and structuralism. This being one critics view.

By Kenneth Warren.

municative structure of America's little magazines. As a result there is an overall confusion about the effects of the Language Movement. This confusion derives, on the one hand, from an obsession of these poets with "the means of production" and, on the other hand, from a desire to be thinkers on the means of communication. While no avant-garde movement yields neat dichotomies, the best and brightest of the Language Movement, obviously intent on achieving notoriety on critical grounds, mix thinking and poetry and as a result push language-centered writing toward a conceptualism that would often seem to blur individual styles and thinking. In no way, however, does it alter the institutionalized context in which Language poets write.

Language poets offer no resistance to the American poetry business, even though they dice texts, enforce obscurity, lift sentences and propound a critique of language and capitalism. All this is done, however, to block understanding of the intentions and wants that make them no different than the majority of American poets who likewise order words into relations of private property. The recourse to copyright law by Language poets may arouse emotions of alienation, estrangement and confusion among readers. The psychological conditions of meaning may appear collapsed in the indecipherable volume of the Language Movement's non-referential writing; however the copyright sign appears in nearly all their books summoning a single referen-

tial mediator—the state.

Beginnings can be found in George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* (1967), Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Louis Zukofsky's "A" (1978), and also in Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* (1967), Karl Marx's *Capital*, and Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1966). By playing fast and loose with ideas and sources the Language Movement proves that a mass of poets can use sheer quantity as a springboard to fame. It is beyond question that Language Poets are attracted to language that is animated by, for no other word, learning gone haywire.

*Daffy runs across
the synapses, hooting
in mock terror.*

*Then he's shown
on an embankment,
watching*

the noisy impulse pass.
(from "Single Most by Rae
Armantrout," in "Realism:
An Anthology of 'Language'
Writing," *Ironwood* 20, Fall
1982)

Language Poets are baby-boomers par excellence. A unique political sensibility thus proceeds from their acute awareness of having been raised on the spoils of WWII, spooked by the cloud of the atomic bomb, driven crazy by the Beat vision of ex-cons and former GI's on the open road and pushed by Vietnam into a complex encounter with Canada. In *Poetry Flash*, a SF little magazine which covers the poetry circuit, Steve Abbott tracks its roots to Viktor Shklovsky, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, and John

Ashbery, while in an opposing view Alan Soldofsky in the same periodical sees the Language Movement as an outgrowth of the New York School Poets such as Clark Coolidge, Ted Berrigan, and Lewis Warsh. Ron Silliman, spokesperson for Language writing, disputes both views. In a 1983 issue of *Ironwood*, he makes clear that perhaps 200 people, a self-creating audience of size and diversity unprecedented in the history of the American small press, could be cited as participating in the Language Movement even though few of these writers could be said to hold any single critical theory.

Politics, Syntax,
and Heroics

By the middle of the Seventies, Language Poets had cultivated a love of military terminology, a preference for the grapheme over the phoneme, a taste for continental thinking, ranging from Jacques Lacan to Walter Benjamin, and a drive to split infinitives befitting any avant-garde. In little magazines they had launched a group attack on the descriptive, naturalistic, referential and transcendental mystifications of literature by scoring in the field of language the linguistic contradictions of commodity culture.

There is not the slightest doubt that the Language Movement has brought with it a telling reflection of the proliferating fragments and uncontrollable splicing of images—the disjunctive characteristics of modern American poetry. These

characteristics—the result of cyclical breakdowns in economic, human, and political order—have driven poets from Whitman to Pound to break up traditional patterns of versification. In turn it has become something of an American tradition to exchange in the name of vernacular speech the rigidity of meter for the sweep of catalog. Yet the medium of this exchange reveals content pointing in the direction of political economy, a bourgeois discipline of accumulation forever reconciled to relations of private property. Rooted in this tradition, the Language Movement shows a poet in hock to the two-pronged mind of structural linguistics and digital computers, attempting to consolidate as a field of force the material properties of the literary deed. Indeed, much of the critique written by Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten first remarked generally that political and advertising language cannot be trusted, before falling in line with the modernist platform explored by Pound, Williams, Olson and Zukofsky. In this relationship, Language poets share an undifferentiated assumption: they take poetry for an energy construct worked on by a poet at a given time, without stating the source of this energy.

The relevance of the Language Movement depends upon awareness of the near total institutionalization of poetry in American culture. The importance of this context is found in the complex hierarchy of economics, politics and religion. Expressed in the semantics of capital and scripture, this hierarchy revolves around meanings of charity and fellowship that inform both the theory and praxe of the movement.

What distinguishes the history of the Language Movement from its com-

position, is ultimately form. This history has a beginning, a middle and an end in the same sense that an epic presents, in a series of ambitious adventures, characters who form an organic whole. These characters do so through their relations to a central heroic figure through the development of episodes essential to the history of a nation. Among poets on all fronts the Language Movement forms such an episode. This is because Language poets, who mark the end of experiment in the material book begun by Whitman, have devised a poetry that neither shapes itself into beginnings, middles or ends, nor derives meaning from them. Furthermore Language poets have not intended such an episode in which the demand for meaning is satisfied by the federal government. In satisfying this demand both through copyright and creative writing fellowships, the federal government reopens language-centered writing to an interpretive role in literature. But instead of an epic poetry proceeding from beginning to end and getting rounded off by the gods, language-centered writing moves back into the dead shell of typography and form, which mutes their initial act of aggression.

Trilogy. They came in to peer, neutral, sporadic, as in an operatic jerky voice, screaming, testing out their vigilance. The apology becomes electric, flam-flakery. They come back from their country carrying their vowels and words moving chronologically forward to forget their past.

Death becomes the independent hand, crowded like the seeds. It becomes a caricature of itself, and the shallow walk becomes its harmony. Floridian gorillas are decorated with active superheroes. . .

Lynne Dryer, in "Language

Sampler," *Paris Review*, 1982)

But it is Uncle Sam who the Language Poets take as their ultimate hero, because it is through the state that notions of signification, symbolic order and resurrected subject come into play for these poets whose lineage can be neatly traced to a closed system of semiotics. The institutionalization of the national image occurs most readily in periods of rising government subsidies for culture, when the anonymous machinery of the state works literature into and out of the national picture. In "Politics of the Referent, Steve McCaffery declares "Language is a huge support system for a particular method of production and distribution that reaches personification in the form of bureaucracy."

Beneath the mystifications of the state's system of support for literature, this give and take, really the essence of a compromise struck between politics and poetry, draws the Language Movement into the double bind of fellowship. Therefore Language Poets, while demonstrating in critical prose a *commitment* to the outside world, actually further in total practice state-inscriptions in the poetic realm.

. . . Their voice in quavery their voice quavers they have a quavery voice, scissor set, capitalist shit, dirty looks; quote mind quote bound gag & tee, sees air; loose wires rebuff speed—Nervous enema murder will out—Irrelevant to talk America, murderers, unlimber up los microwaves with pullout bed protect self-interest goo on Broadway any one of these wounds might have seemed fatal. do you know an opposite, do you know an operative. . .

(from "Confidence Trick" by Bruce Andrews, in "Language Sampler," *Paris Review* 86, Winter 1982)

Word of the Language Movement oftens travels by mouth. Everyone must engage in supplying innuendo, inference based on no knowledgeable evidence, suppression of fact and direct misstatement of fact. On the basis of poetry alone, nobody would mistake a Language Poet as an operative, or for that matter, the movement as a fellowship per se. Yet community relations do arise from the basic contradiction between the private character of poetry production turned subsidized printing press and the social character of language turned creative property. Of itself this contradiction gave birth to the Language Movement in the first place, making for good fiction, which is to say, vision. So there is a paradox in the infringement of ideology upon poetry, and from these two systems of belief, there is also a symbolic level. Language-centered writing goes astray as soon as it is drawn and quartered by the state. Therefore, its meaning is, at best, a reflected one: reflected by the distribution of a technique which demonstrates how contradiction expresses itself stylistically in the transformed aspects of poetry and money during the recent period of government support for the letters. The point is language-centered writing perpetuates a yearning for style rather than for subversion. The state supports it because in style begins individuality, that is, expression waiting to be crowned as property and title, cornerstones of Western values.

Relations with Art and Structuralism

There is at the center of the Language Movement a collective genius that "engages critical forms of

Continued on next page

discourse in a prosodic scrupulousness of intention that relies for its coherence more on the internal necessities of the poetic process of meaning than on the external constraints of rationalistic argument" (Charles Bernstein, 1982). On the one hand, this genius roused Language Poets to reject from poetry the object pointed to by critical forms of discourse; on the other hand, it has allowed them to make themselves a social referent from the excesses arising from their poetic strategy in the first place. As Bernstein says, "Issues of poetics, when not explicitly determining the genre of the work, often permeate its mode of address—a tendency that can pull the poem out of the realm of the purely personal reference and into a consideration of the interaction among seemingly competing spheres of politics, autobiography, fiction, philosophy, common sense, song, etc." Language-centered writing is then an address that builds models and selects categories in such a way as to illuminate the manner in which "distinctions between essays and lyrics, prose and poetry are often not observed." It is moreover an address inviting critics to loose sight of the distinctions between the creative and critical writings of the Language Poets even when they have drawn it.

Collectively the gestures of Language Poets have represented a reaction to pop arts' earlier celebrations of consumer culture, and their critical sources. From Barthes to Benjamin, from Ashbery to Creeley, all have written perceptively on the visual arts. "What language-centered writing serves to emphasize is the semicritical relationship of consecutive to simultaneous sign, the striated nature of a reading and a seeing, and the relationship of a spatial to a linear syntax," writes McCaffery. While the

semiotics from which the Language Movement has developed stretches and expands until its connections with the other arts are revealed, the relationship between language-centered writing and other arts has not been understood as easily as that between New American Poetry and Abstract Expressionism.

The Language Movement is, however, like the anti-art movements of conceptualism, documentary art, minimalism and performance art both in its renunciation of aesthetic, relational qualities as well as in its imposition of preordained conceptual schemes. With such conceptual artists as Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris under their belts, Language poets turned to the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky for a theory of objects. Language poets also hold in contempt the bourgeois value of the importance of the unique poem and their writing offers itself as having nothing to do with symbols and metaphors. In the form of irreducible words language-centered writing is irrefutable as an object and also as property. Not only were the Seventies a decade of increased of government funding for culture but these years were also a period of retrenchment and theorizing in all arts and letters. Because Language poets want to strike a blow to the narrative line and replace it with a line of theory, the conjunction between federalism and structuralism, two systems dedicated to unity through binary patterns, reveals language-centered writing as a mechanical expression born to a method of comparison and raised in a political and economic context.

The Language Movement and the anti-art movements of the last decade are products of structuralism. In a critical approach to structuralist theory, Edmund Leach discusses the scientific

basis of this conceptual scheme for binary patterns: "One very important feature of this ordering process is that we cut up the continua of space and time with which we are surrounded into segments, so that we are predisposed to think of the environment as consisting of vast numbers of separate things belonging to named classes, and to think of the passage of time as consisting of sequences of separate events. Thus the Language Movement, so committed to fragments and the cut up of non-poetic materials, nests in the universal logic of commodity exchange. As such, it is only with great difficulty that the Language Movement can reveal anything more than a single measure for understanding—the result of which is that there is no poetic dimension to understanding, since, however profound, the Language poets will cut it up. They must behave this way not because they are working to bring about a balance between eye and ear, imagination and intellect, heart and hand, but rather because they are living, gesturing and writing in the context of a material world wherein the state sustains, protects, and in the end values and devalues signs of cultural labor.

"L Fake by Numbers

Language is the center, the primary material, the sacred corpus, the primum mobile, the erotic sense of its own shared reality," says Andrews. All together the Language Poets have embraced it as fetish, "a supernatural property of the object and hence to a similar magical potential in the subject" (Baudrillard, 1981) which "through schemas of projection and capture, alienation and reappropriation" a context for

understanding the found sentence, while locking it into literary tradition. The language fetish belongs first to Whitman's materialist criterion, which is a valuation of linguistic matter in motion. It extends into the Language Movement not only from Whitman's vision of substance in the mass of workers, but also Pound's labor theory of poetry, a program that presents the image of the laboring writer as both "the skilled craftsman, expertly fashioning a handsome and useful object" and "the amateur scientist, tinkering in his laboratory with ordinary compounds and improvised paraphernalia" (Bishop, 1983). This search for a set of instruments for the poet that would be useable in the concrete world, which is "clearly a throwback to the science of Bacon and Galileo, before science was harnessed to the traces of modern industry" (Bishop, 1983) ended with the discovery of the found sentence and the death of poet as craftsman.

If the found sentence returns the Language Movement's ruling concept of commodity fetishism to a deeper context of language fetishism in American poetry, it serves also to point to the failure of these poets to express a true measure of the "labor process" in their writing. What becomes apparent in the found sentence is "the aspect of faking, of artificial registering—in short, of a cultural sign labor—and that this is at the origin of the status of the fetish object, and thus also plays some part in the fascination it exercises" (Baudrillard, 1981). And it is precisely such a fascination that has pulled so many poets into the Language Movement.

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