Eleana Kim

Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement

Tradition and Communal Praxis

> Space was needed to be at rest with survival.[1]

The life-span of the movement could be demarcated from the early 1970s with the appearance of little magazines such as *Tottel's* (1970-1981), *Hills* (1973-1983), and *This* (1971-1982), reaching its peak in the late 1970s with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978-1982); in the 1980s, it enjoyed a privileged status among high-brow academics who had found an art form particularly suited, indeed, symptomatic, of the very forces engendering the rise of postmodern cultural and post-structuralist theories. Simplifying its history, one can detect a trend from the localized debates centered in the San Francisco scene, which were carried by such critics as Marjorie Perloff and Jerome McGann into a larger sphere of visibility, and since its full emergence as a cultural force, into the academic regions increasingly inhabited by subjects whose histories are similar to those of the poets themselves, that of the post-Vietnam generation of intellectuals.

Sociologically, Ron Silliman has placed himself and the majority of his peers in the baby boom generation of the New Middle Class,[2] having been born in or around 1945. In "for *Change*," Steve Benson describes the group in terms of their social conditioning and positionings: "Having integrated the impact of the post-World-War-II protest movements both as critiques of authority and as arguments for rights and prizing an awkwardly marginal status in the corporate hegemony, these writers have developed strategies that test more markedly than they indoctrinate, resist rather than seduce or assure. ..."[3]

The "small press revolution" which exploded in the early 1960s as a heterogeneous site of alternative production set apart from the mostly East Coast corporate publishing houses, permitted public access for an unprecedented number of poets, "professional" or otherwise. According to the 1978-1979 Directory of Little Magazines, the Bay Area had 179 small presses and magazines, two-thirds greater than the number in New York. Steve Abbott's "state of the art" summary for *Poetry Flash* in November 1979 describes the sectarianism of the San Francisco writing community: "One might ask if there's any real sense of community among Bay poets at all or if what exists is more a loose conglomerate of jealous, suspicious and sniping factions." He names the Poetry Center, Intersection, and Cody's as the more established venues which "seem to have the most consistent clout in getting big name poets." These "big name" poets seem to be those who had made the transition from the "old world" community-based New American figurations to the institutionalized, highly-acclaimed status of writers such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan or John Ashbery.

During the 1970s, with the Beat-generation cult of the ego on the decline, writers such as Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti emerged as "political" poets whose conventional expressivist poetics took controversial issues such as feminism, the Vietnam War, or U.S. intervention in Central America, and gave them a "human face." This oppositional poetry reacted against the bureaucratization of everyday life by reinscribing experience and feeling in a manner which could be seen as a politically motivated act against the technocratic and materialistic state, yet utilized the very apparatus which maintains the literary status quo: "I have always seen the poet, and by extension, the publisher of poets as an enemy of the state, and by that I mean the military-industrial complex, technocratic and materialistic world which grinds down the free subjective individual."[4] No longer a viable articulation of the individual/society matrix, the notion of the "free subjective individual" is one which has given way, in more recent theoretical trends, to the "decentered subject," socially constructed through language and interpellated by ideology. It is this recent "postmodern" subjectivity which organizes the Language poets' poetics, shifting forms from experiential narratives to deconstructive strategies which plummet language for its resistant or liberationary potential.

Responding to the "Society of the Spectacle" (Guy Debord), these poets rejected mimetic, voice poetries which stress "naturalness" and "reality," concepts in crisis which could not be relied upon as the mass media transformed the present into a reality of reified commodities: "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."5 The accelerating atomization of experience and the subordination of the individual to the state by means of increasingly sophisticated ideological systems also rendered the individualist poetics as inherited from Whitman (and reinfused by the Beats) insufficient for this new generation of poets. Group dissent, a consensual dynamic invested in the communal production of a poetics of resistance, created the possibility for a dialectical interchange between individual producers and collective identity which militated against repressive state and cultural apparatuses.

Chantal Mouffe provides a useful analysis of what she calls the "new forms of subordination" which developed out of the full installation of the capitalist hegemony during the post-World War II era:

> Today, it is not only through the sale of their labor power that individuals are submitted to the domination of capital but also through their participation in many other social relations. So many spheres of social life are now penetrated by capitalist relations that it is almost impossible to escape them. My thesis is that many of the new social movements are expressions of resistance against that commodification of social life and the new forms of subordination it has created.

The Language school poets can be historically located in the political climate of the late 1960s and 70s, in which the crisis of national identity and domestic stability, coinciding with the rise of multinational capitalism and the inauguration of "postmodernism," precipitated an essential conflict between a traditionally dominant subject positioning and the real conditions of existence. As Mouffe writes:

> An antagonism can emerge when a collective subject, that has been constructed in a specific way, to certain existing discourses, finds its subjectivity negated by other discourses or practices. That negation can happen in two basic ways. First, subjects constructed on the basis of certain rights can find themselves in a position in which those rights are denied by some practices or discourses. At that point there is negation of subjectivity or identification, which can be the basis for an antagonism.

This antagonism must also be considered in the context of the Feminist and Black Liberation movements. With revolutionary interventions by historically-subordinated groups altering the political landscape, white male activists were forced to recognize their positions in subordination, what Ron Silliman has termed "privileged oppression."

This political positioning provided the terms for Language poetry's own avant-garde project. Consistently denying a hegemonic status within the margins of the poetic,6 their sense of collective resistance to the dominant also included an agenda of pluralism which, in the "exploded" literary map of the 1970s and 80s, positioned them without an active strategy for coalition beyond their own well-maintained borders. This self-sanctioned autonomy, emerging in relation to the New American tradition, could only be defined in distinction from the aesthetics of the dominant formations. Engaging in struggles which contested the legitimacy of instituted norms, without providing an adequate alternative to the paradigms already installed, their self-representation was often times at odds with their actual position in the field.

Having come of age in the late 1960s, and educated in the latter days of the New Criticism, their sense of literature was informed by what was then a divisive terrain separated by the "official verse culture" of the universities and the "public" canon comprised of the tendencies brought together in the Allen anthology. How poetry was discursively constructed at that time is integral to the development of their "alternative" poetics. Judging from the accounts of Jerome Rothenberg and David Antin,7 the split between the New Critical canons of the universities and that of the Black Mountain-New York School axis was essential to their own revisionist projects.

> While Olson's representation of the Pound-Eliot-Tate tradition as the Pound-Williams-Zukofsky tradition went more or less unnoticed by anyone not directly involved with this recreation of American modernism, Ginsberg's amalgamation of Whitman, Williams, Lawrence, Blake, and the englished versions of the French, German, and Spanish moderns styles...produced instant panic and revulsion. This is probably the poetry that Tate was referring to as "anti-poetry" in 1968 (Antin, 1972).

Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, and Barrett Watten were students of Ted Berrigan at Iowa, and while this in and of itself may lack significance to their subsequent careers, it is indicative of the absorption of New American figures into the expanding workshop system. It is within this sub-field of poetry, the so-called "New American," that these poets must be considered.8

Against these two strains of American poetics, the Language poets reacted against both the dictates of Williams' "plain speak" as it had (d)evolved through numerous mediations and bastardizations, and against the cult of personality — that which glorified the prophetic mysticism of Ginsberg or the alcohol-induced anomic confessions of Robert Lowell. The perfecting of so-called "voice" in lyric confessional poetry being practiced in the majority of writing programs in America relies on an assumption of authenticity and the authority of the poet in providing epiphanies of feeling. For this new group of experimental writers, foregrounding artifice was one way in which the "seamless," "natural" quality of the free verse lyric could be opposed, thereby revealing the constructedness of meaning and experience in language.

As the division between the academic and the public production of poetry became more pronounced following the fallout of the late 1960s, certain New American communities found funding and support at universities like San Francisco State, SUNY Buffalo, and Brown, while most other MFA programs became well-oiled factories maintained by proponents of an overwrought Lowellian mode.9 While this division is prone to stark polarities, it is one that the Language poets themselves have maintained in justifying their own communal production.10

The organization of the writers on an east-west axis in *In the American Tree* is intended by Silliman to call attention to the importance of community scenes to the development of their writing. This sort of division, however, is misleading considering the free-flowing correspondence and publishing which took place between the two coasts. The bi-coastal network was comprised of communal sites of publication in magazines as well as presses. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, edited by two New York-based poets, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, was started in 1978 as a public forum for discussions of common interests in poetics, politics and philosophy.

> We've all been engaged in that project in the mail and in conversation for years and are trying in a small way by doing the magazine to get some of that somewhat less restrictive — where it isn't just a matter of what particular person you happen to be close friends with or happen to have access to through the mail that you carry on this wonderful dialogue with, but to get some of that out in a more public way, to build a sense of community, to some extent, to get some of the issued clarified, to get the information around in a somewhat easier fashion, and to try to do it ourselves as writers, rather than constantly having these questions mediated by some particular critical establishment. ...11

The creation of this textual *polis*, with such a provocative and emblematic name, became a marker for the movement in the following years, when scholars from the "critical establishment" began to take notice and to mediate the very questions Andrews and Bernstein were trying to protect from the co-optation of institutional legitimation.

The non-normative presentation of much of the work in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* contributed to its image as merely a public display of a closed circle of pretentious and over-educated "poets." John Taggart's letter to the editor in the second issue condemns the "grand-standing" which he feels has upstaged the conventional function of poetry reviews:

> As I remember, the main thing was information. If that is the accepted criterion, I find most of it an out and out failure. Most of it (the reviews) is just too self-conscious, too cute to be of use. ... I find this especially harmful with small press publications. It's not unusual for even a commercial press book of poems to be out a year without being reviewed once anywhere. The odds jump for small presses. Given that, I find it nearly criminal to so grandstand that a reader can have little or no conception of what the work is like. ... There may be a place for Barthes' choreography du text (which I doubt), but surely it comes well after the basic identification of the text has been established. ... It is a disservice to the writers involved and if you say after all everybody knows everybody else, well I ask you.12

Taggart's criticism is based on more conventional assumptions about literary consumption, in which a coherent, logical synopsis of the object in question is presented to the reading public in order to convince potential consumers of its use and exchange value. He received no response

from the editors, but his outrage over the "reviewing" of poetry with poetry indexes one of the ways in which these writers challenged the prevailing norms of genre and acceptable expository discourse.

The rise of MFA programs and the resulting proliferation of the generic workshop lyric has been bemoaned by many poets outside the university system, yet it is not only its "blandness" which poets such as Bernstein and Silliman objected to, but the broader cultural implications of a homogenized confessional poetry institutionally supported and reproduced. This has more often than not been the point of comparison for the "mainstream" critics who pit Galway Kinnell or Robert Bly against Charles Bernstein or Bob Perelman. The usefulness of such an exercise is limited, as has been noted by Michael Greer,13 yet the significance of the critical apparatus in the constitution of their practice extends beyond just the naming of the group. Interrogating the industry and its production of "what constitutes poetry," the group's work actively resisted complicit poetic formulas which accede to the mechanisms of "taste." Its redefinition of the "poetic" was thereby enmeshed with two crucial aspects of the production of literariness — criticism and canonization — two productive forces without which "Language Poetry" would not have entered literary history.

---

1 Harryman, Carla, from "Arizona," *Under the Bridge*, This, 1980.

2 see Silliman's "The Political Economy of Poetry," *The New Sentence*, 1986. He uses the term as theorized by neo-Marxists such as Nikolas Poulantzas and Erik Olin Wright.

3 Benson, "for *Change*," *In the American Tree*, p. 486.

4 Ferlinghetti, "The Publisher As Enemy Of The State", *Poetry Flash*, May 1985.

5 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, used as an epigraph in Bruce Andrew's early book, *Edge*, Arry Press, 1973.

6 These denials, mostly articulated by Ron Silliman, were used to counter the New Americans' hostility with an analytic presentation of the state of the art and the poetic/political horizon.

7 cf. Rothenberg, Jerome, introduction to *Revolution of the Word*, 1974, and Antin, David "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry, *boundary2*, 1:1, Fall 1972.

8 In a short piece for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 2* Ted Greenwald lists some anthologies which informed his own poetic memory: the Allen anthology, Paul Carroll's *The Young American Poets*, Anne Waldman's *Another World*, the Pack and Hall anthology, Padgett and Shapiro's *An Anthology of New York Poets*, Rothenberg's *Revolution of the Word*, Michael Lally's *None of the Above*.

9 Charles Olson became poet-in-residence at SUNY Buffalo in the 1960s, and his chair was subsequently filled by another Black Mountaineer, Robert Creeley. Robert Duncan resided at San Francisco State in the 1970s, and the Waldrops continue to maintain another important community at Brown University, from which they run Burning Deck Press.

10 see the *Social Text* collaborative statement, "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto," 1988.

11 Bruce Andrews, from "The Pacifica Interview", *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, supplement no. 3, October, 1981.

12 *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 2, 1978.

13 "Ideology and Theory in Recent Experimental Writing, or the Naming of Language Poetry", *boundary2*, 16:2-3, 1989.

Jump To

[Back to Readme]