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Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement

San Francisco, circa 1975

Ron Silliman's "KETJOG" (*sic*) (at LaSalamanca) is a Balinese oral form, he says. It repeats and repeats, adding new lines without apparent relation, building with great visual and mental invention a tremendous formal beauty that carries no cargo at all.¹

In 1975 Ron Silliman edited a collection of nine poets in *Alcheringa*, Jerome Rothenberg's journal of ethnopoetics. Called "The Dwelling Place," it brought together a group of "Language-centered" writers, including Clark Coolidge, Barrett Watten, Bruce Andrews, Larry Eigner, David Melnick, Barbara Barracks, Ray DiPalma, Lee DeJesu, and Silliman himself. This, along with the declaration by Robert Grenier, "I HATE SPEECH"² have been retrospectively cited as the inaugural events marking the birth of Language poetry. As a tendency, however, it is less easily tracked. Other, pre-Language figures such as Jackson MacLow, Clark Coolidge, and Michael Palmer, who had already published and accumulated recognition in other circles,³ were included without ideological conflict, although later they each distanced themselves from the group and its political implications and project.

The claiming of a distinctively alternative canon served to historically situate and sanction much of this praxis. Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, Jack Spicer, and the Russian Futurists are some of the Modernist influences who were repeatedly cited for their formal innovation, attention to language and its materiality. The "new" contributions which these poets as a group have made are those which have garnered the most negative criticism. Their serious considerations of French post-structuralism and socialist theory enabled a radical, utopian project. Much of their writing functioned as ideology critique, foregrounding the production of meaning and dismantling the "naturalness" of poetic discourse. Especially with the appearance of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and the publications of critical collections by Watten, Silliman, and Bernstein, the question of theory came to be the most contested element in the Language poets' emergence.

The *Alcheringa* collection focused on the "diminished referentiality" of the nine poets, defining a tendency that could be legitimated by its linguistic experimentation, historical precedent, and post-structuralist theory. Silliman declared, "Words are not, finally, non-referential." The question of reference, which was to become highly contested, especially as the critique of capitalism came to be a defining feature of this group's writing, is here presented as an appropriation of the Russian Formalist tactic of defamiliarization. Linking these representative works to the work of Creeley and Eigner, concrete poetry, *zaum*, primitivism, and Roland Barthes, Silliman's gloss functions to make this work accessible to new readers. Next to the materiality of language, Silliman names a "community of concern for language" as a second shared characteristic which brings these writers together.⁴

As was to become evident in the anthologies, this invocation of community became a fixture in the various public introductions of Language poetry in anthologies and journals. Despite the lack of a central figure such as Olson was to the Black Mountain School, or Berrigan to the second-generation New York School, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten emerged as the most vocal representatives of the group, and received a disproportionate amount of "bashing" from other poets and critics. In the context of the "exploded" map of literary production, especially in the San Francisco scene, "community" takes on ideologically-loaded significance. Here, the question of audience becomes essential to the Language poets' self-image and identity. Against other coalitions such as Third World or feminist networks, Language poetry could be seen as simply another sphere in which writers addressed their own concerns among themselves. Yet the sociological makeup of the group, the majority of whom were white, male, and heterosexual, invited accusations of elitism, and with language as their only mark of distinction, of "trying to have a private picnic on a public beach."⁵

The poetry scenes of San Francisco in the mid-to late 1970s were varied, with "coalitions" forming at different venues — "Third World" writers such as those associated with Ishmael Reed's journal *Yardbird*,⁶ and women's collectives⁷ — asserting their positions through networks of presses, readings and publications. New Americans of the New York School, the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance were still important figures, as indexed by their frequent appearances at benefits and special events. The First and Second Annual San Francisco Poetry Festivals in 1976 and 1977 featured, among others, Kenneth Rexroth, Michael McClure, Robert Duncan, Miriam Patchen, Ishmael Reed, Gregory Corso, Bob Kaufman, Thom Gunn, Diane DiPrima, Gary Snyder, Andrei Codrescu, and Robert Bly. Next to readings by gay, women, and Third World poets, and the highly visible and well-established Beats and New Americans, the names of Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, Rae Armantrout, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Steve Benson, and Kit Robinson began to appear with increasing frequency in the calendar of readings in San Francisco's monthly poetry newsletter, *Poetry Flash*.

Starting in 1976, Bob Perelman's Folsom Street talk series, Carla Harryman and Steve Benson's Grand Piano reading series, as well as readings as the Third Floor Bookstore, and Terminal Concepts, and later, the 80 Langton lecture series, became regular events, indicating that these poets were becoming a consistent presence. Other writers such as Kathy Acker, David Gitin, Michael Palmer, Barbara Einzig, Michael Davidson, Sherrill Jaffe, John Thorpe, Darrell Gray, Abby Child, and Leslie Scalapino participated in these public events as well. Also around this time, the writers being featured in Barrett Watten's *This* and Bob Perelman's *Hills* became increasingly predictable, with East Coast writers associated with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* taking the places once filled by older New American writers such as Tom Clark, Robert Creeley, Darrell Gray, Anselm Hollo, and Lewis MacAdams.

In May 1979 the first of *Poetry Flash*'s "special topic" issues (#74) focused on the so-called "Language poets." That their presence was being perceived as that of a group sharing a "monolithic or easily identifiable dogma" is one which sanctions *Poetry Flash* editor Steve Abbott's attempts to sketch out "certain distinctions" apart from personal friendships, which constitute them as a group. "The term was coined because *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is a prominent New York magazine of the group. I find the term appropriate because the group has focused attention away from 'making it' (i.e.: the poet as hero and dramatic performer) to 'what has been made' (i.e.: how does the language and technique of the poem or text itself work)."

By 1979 most of the core members had published at least one book with a small press. Writers like Palmer and Davidson had published with Black Sparrow Press, one of the larger and more established small publishers with strong ties to the New American lineage.⁸ Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba chapbook series, Barrett Watten's *This* press, Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop's *Burning Deck* and Geoffrey Young's *The Figures* offered access to print for these writers, the main of which had a total of around thirty books published by 1979.⁹

Abbott sketches out two major distinctions of the Language poets: their indebtedness to Kerouac and Zukofsky, and their negative relationship to first-person narrative or ego-centric verse in favor of the "constructed fast-shifting 'I' of Frank O'Hara, the various senses of 'I' in Ted Berrigan." Abbott foregrounds their critiques of the first-person pronoun, using it as a mechanism to present his own opinion of their closed network of intellectual obscurity as "solipsistic." For the most part a positive reception of these poets, Abbott's appreciative evaluation of the "earnestness and intensity of the group's scrutiny of language and poetry," is then followed by a scathing opinion piece by *Poetry Flash* contributing editor Alan Soldofsky.

In an article, "Towards a Poetics of Narcissism," published a few months earlier that year, Soldofsky outlined his views on the lamentable state of poetic mediocrity which he linked to the post-1945 boom in publishing houses and workshop programs. He applies conservative pundit Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* to all varieties of contemporary poetics, including the "experimentalists": "The narcissist, in this case, does not care if the reader's eyes glaze over in fatigue or bewilderment after a few lines as long as the reader is willing to be impressed by the poet's brilliance." Considering them "untempered by history" and neglectful of a previous generation of experimental writers, Soldofsky, in *Poetry Flash*'s "Language poetry issue" continued his disparaging representation of the Language poets as symptomatic of a broader decline in American culture and letters, in an article entitled "Language and Narcissism." He writes, "the flight from emotional feeling is both characteristic of the language poets and our age. These writers are consciously refusing to make literature that performs the intuitive and emotional work poetry has done in the past. Though they insist on the linguistic and intellectual importance of their writing, semiotics lies outside the concern of primary poetry tradition."

He goes so far as to equate their defamiliarizing devices with Nixon'speak: "It could be argued that the language used by spokespersons from the Nixon Administration during the Vietnam War and the Watergate Investigation, when they lapsed into evasive, de-personalized jargon, found new meanings for old words." This sort of tactic was to be replicated during the Reagan era when critics, in attempting to undermine the Language poets' so-called textual politics, equated their use of disjunction and fragmentation with "postmodern" depthlessness, thereby reinscribing rather than critiquing the pervasive media reification linked to the quick cutting of MTV and a sound-bite-studded information age. While Soldofsky's arguments could easily be dismissed as a conservative's reaction to the work of iconoclastic youth, his points of argumentation and the responses this article elicited are ones which were repeatedly enacted as Language poetry's reputation expanded to national and international proportions.

Aside from incredulous responses to Soldofsky's Watergate reference, a letter from Bruce Boone appeared which anticipated another series of debates which brought the movement out of the closed circuit of the San Francisco scenes. These involved the self-determination of the group, its lack of a "developed social sense," and the "petty" poetry wars which limited them to a coterie, predicating their existence on gang mentality rather than on a theoretical contract which could correspond to those of their Modernist predecessors. Silliman objected to the presuppositions implied by "group identity" and "hegemony," and expressed his concern with the modes of legitimation in the poetry industry itself: "my point is that the old modes of co-optation no longer exist, either in the promise of 'big books from the right houses' or in jobs. This might well precipitate a crisis for any group of writers who sought that as a defined goal, but it might just as well lead to a reassessment of the relation of poetry to community."

Considering the course the movement took in the following years, Silliman's comments proved to be both true and false. The rules of co-optation may have changed, yet the concomitant reassessment of the "relation to poetry to community" might be more accurately restated as the "relation of poetry to the canon." In his introduction to *In the American Tree*, Silliman justified the theoretical polemics of the group by comparing this "self-discipline" to that of the New Americans: "...the failure to write and speak seriously about the work cedes the authority to define critical terms to others while canceling the possibility of any articulate self-discipline within the community, a combination which had disastrous results for portions of the previous generation (xix). These disastrous results are the co-optation of these figures into university canons and the defusion of their "original" intent, historical precedence, and specificity. The Language poetry "hegemony," however, in relation to others in the literary left, has in many ways overshadowed the work of others on the margins, and it is as much a product of their strength in numbers as the attention they received from both mainstream and academic critics.

Another debate which was to continue into the next decade was sparked by Rae Armantrout's essay, "Why Don't More Women do Language-Oriented Writing?" reprinted from *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, which opened this *Poetry Flash* special issue. In the essay, Armantrout considers the ways in which writers like Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian and Carla Harryman use non-normative syntax and structure to comment on or to foreground the role of language in ordering meaning and experience. The essay aims to show that the frequently posed title question is misguided, because the term "language-oriented" is not specific to gender and is misleading in terms of the issue of referentiality. Yet, in a letter to the editor following the Language issue, Armantrout expresses regret for allowing her article to be reprinted: "Actually, I'm amazed you wanted to use it since you so glaringly ignore the very women my essay admonished *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine to consider."¹⁰ Leslie Scalapino wrote a letter charging that Armantrout's article was embedded in a phallo-logocentric discourse, and that it tacitly assumed that the male Language poets determined the paradigm of Language work. Consequently, Scalapino argued, any work by women would fall outside the category thus established: "Criticism generally is based on social boundaries which it does not examine; a problem which seems to be, and should be, at the heart of language/ structuralist concerns." Scalapino's viewpoint engages another vital issue, especially in terms of the "hegemony" question introduced by Boone. The voices of dominant male writers such as Watten and Silliman provoked interrogations of gender representation and raised specific feminist concerns for female language writers, who tended to examine their own writing practices through the bifocal lens of gender and power.

The initial debates that were played out in this special issue of *Poetry Flash* would be reiterated and reframed throughout the 1980s.¹¹ This primary textual confrontation laid the groundwork for subsequent debates, as the militant reputation of the "Language poets" began to take hold. The critical productivity of Silliman, Watten, and Bernstein reproduced certain key terms and ideas, and also fueled many of the textual controversies. Out of these contentious debates over poetic and literary legitimacy the Language movement was produced. While it would be impossible to take

into account all of the various circumstances which converged in the creation of this movement, it is worth considering the tensions between the loose affiliations within the network and the critical reception of the group's image and work. As critics took positions vis-à-vis this new poetic formation, "Language poetry" began increasingly to connote a coherent group identity, compelling those associated with it to defend their personal, political, and theoretical allegiances.

1 Review in *Poetry Flash*, September 1974.

2 From *This* 1, 1971. Ron Silliman cites these two moments in his introduction to *In the American Tree*.

3 Jackson MacLow, a performance artist/poet from New York, fits into no easy designation, though his "career" is coincident with other avant-garde artists such as Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin, Armand Schwerner, and most notably, John Cage. Coolidge, affiliated with the second-generation New York School through Ted Berrigan and Bernadette Meyer, edited the journal *Joglars* with Michael Palmer in the early 1970s. Palmer had published his first collection in 1972 with Black Sparrow Press, under the wing of Robert Duncan.

4 It is interesting to speculate on the alliances between the works of "diminished referentiality" and Rothenberg's own ethnopoetic revisionism. Potentially resonant with a primitivistic fetishism, ethnopoetics would, at face value, be anathema to the Language poet's historical materialist senses, yet the connections Silliman draws between his selections and tribal poetics or transrational *zaum* find affinities in the non-instrumental use of language, pre-capitalist in implication and anti-capitalist in spirit.

5 Denise Levertov, in *What is a Poet?* Hank Lazer, ed. 1983.

6 E.g., Frank Chin, Leslie Silko, Simon Ortiz, Nzotake Shange, Jessica Hagedorn, Roberto Vargas, Carol Lee Sanchez, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, to name a few.

7 Organized and including women writers such as Judy Grahn, Adrienne Rich, Kathleen Fraser, Susan Griffin, Bev Dahlen, as well as experimental women writers involved in *Room* magazine, and later to become part of the formation around the magazine, *How(ever)*, started in 1983 by Kathleen Fraser.

8 Davidson, *Summer Letters* (1977); Palmer *Blake's Newton* (1972).

9 Those poets I am considering "the main" are Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, Rae Armantrout, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Steve Benson and Kit Robinson. Messerli, publisher of Sun & Moon Books, wrote in 1987 that the output of these presses totals over 300 titles. "Experimental" poets who were not Language *per se* were nevertheless vital in the establishment of these alternative site of production. Recalling the *Publisher's Weekly* article from Chapter 1, it was the extreme productivity of these independent publishers and their exploitation of a profitable niche which was intended to raise the eyebrows of trade publishers.

10 *Poetry Flash* #75, June 1979.

11 In January 1985, Richard Silberg, then editor of *Poetry Flash*, in reviewing Michael Palmer's new collection, *First Figure*, felt compelled to test him against the criteria of "orthodox" language poetry, those being a decentered "I," and a use of language which "floats free of its referents." Having established Palmer as fulfilling those prerequisites, he then maintains that Palmer's "ego" is evident in his control language and in the beauty of his craft. This has been a pattern in the reception of writers such as Palmer, Hejinian and Davidson, whose works are considered to be more "lyrical" than that of Silliman or Watten, and therefore, to be "better," or "exceptions to the rule."

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