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# Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement

## Rumor in the House of Fame

> The "art of the difficult" aspect of modernism is a defense mechanism. By difficulty, a writer makes it harder to be absorbed and commoditized. It is a form of buying time. It is a sad thing to watch. It never works.1

Gaining currency in the early 1980s, Language poetry as a recognizable group quickly became defined "in the negative" — in opposition to the characteristics of its supposed enemies: "ego-centered," "crude personism," "referentiality," and "narrative" in their various traditional and formal guises. The "word as such" replaced the "speaking subject." Two journal collections were published in 1982, one edited by Ron Silliman for *Ironwood*, and the other by Charles Bernstein for the *Paris Review*'s "Language Sampler." These textual manifestations initiated the dynamic between the identification of these writers from the outside, their resistance to those terms of delimitation, and the simultaneous solicitation of an audience on those terms. "Visibility is increased at the cost of a presumed homogeneity," as Ron Silliman notes in his essay, "Realism,"2 introducing his selection of Language writing. Taking to task all of the accusations and imposed definitions to which Language poetry had been subject, Silliman, in attempting to foreground the diversity of the group, and the inadequacy of an all-encompassing rubric for the various styles and aesthetics of the individuals, nevertheless is compelled to make reparations for the misconstruals. Here, as elsewhere, Silliman invokes community: "And the evolution of an audience is finally what this is all about. *The coherence of this selection is to be found* not in the writing with its various methods and strategies, taking different positions on different questions, but *in the social composition of its audience*. The project of this writing is the discovery of a community."

The authoring of Language poetry hinges on the mis-representations of the supporters, detractors and of the poets themselves. When Silliman asks the rhetorical question: "But what is the objective record?" what he offers in response is a retort to all those who would pigeon-hole him and his cohorts as a theoretically top-heavy, elitist sect. Each attempt at deconstructing the reductive formulas offered by various critics at the same time re-inscribed the very categories which "representatives" such as Silliman were seeking to invalidate. It is this double-movement which has characterized Language poetry's reception by the "mainstream." Often jibed for its seeming hypocrisy as a group which denied its "group-ness," Language poetry's "discovery of a community" implies that it was fulfilling some sort of cultural need, responding to a previously unheard audience, or creating one from the specific political, social and historical indices of the last two decades. What is vital to the understanding of Language poetry as a discursive moment is the seemingly deliberate and careful "documentation" of theory and poetics and its relevance to the creation of a readership.

"Community" functions for Silliman as a means of "naturalizing" what was being perceived from the outside as a militaristic and well-organized "movement." In creating a site for the articulation of "shared concerns," the group became vulnerable to the homogenizing reductions of others viewing the formation from a distance. It is only within this locality, however, that this "avant-garde" could sustain a project wedding the social and the poetic. Community sentiment becomes one way of deflecting what was also considered to be a "gang mentality," and it functioned both as self-protection and intervention. Yet the ideology of community is falls easily into nostalgic impulses and relies on humanistic values. Lacking a sense of the broader social imperatives for cross-border coalitions, their representations sutured them to a limited sector specific to class and race.

Communication is the central ethic of this movement as presented by Charles Bernstein in his "Language Sampler" for *The Paris Review*. Preambled by Jonathan Galassi, (then poetry editor of

*PR*) as "an ideologically, psychologically and linguistically self-conscious movement," Bernstein's collection introduces writers mostly from the East Coast through works which "can be characterized in the negative as writing that does not privilege any single mode, including the expository logic and speech-derived syntax that dominate contemporary writing practice." It is the recognition of the ideological component of conventional modes of address, those which rely on the invisibility of the mode itself for effectivity which dictates these writers' alternative communicative methods. What is explored are those aspects of language and consciousness which cannot be articulated through superannuated modes. "At the same time, however, there is a claim being made to a syntax — to put it indefensibly — of pure music, of absolute attention to the ordering of sound's syllables. ..." Bernstein translates the "materiality" of the language into "music," emphasizing the rhythmic and phonic aspects over the graphemic, implying a "beyond" language through language. "Indefensibly, that is, because there really is not pure music any more than there is pure language since any material practice becomes itself a mode."

By 1983, the journals which had helped institute these poets as a recognizable group had ceased publication. *Hills* and *This* had ten and eleven year runs, respectively, and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, ending after thirteen issues and three supplements, was salvaged from possible obscurity by the publication of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* in 1984.3 Edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, this publication, perhaps more than the inception of the magazine itself, aided in the reception of the work by readers outside of the active poetry networks. Marjorie Perloff heralded their existence in the pages of *The American Poetry Review* ("The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties," May/June 1984), thereby consecrating them as a legitimate movement for an audience trained to read and expect "quality" in the Lowellian confessional mode.

Perloff, the author of several books on experimental poetry, an Ivy League English Department academic, frames "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" poetry in the received conventions of poetic discourse. Taking most of her cues from Charles Bernstein, she explicates the devices at work by means of "walk-through" close readings, invoking Yeats repeatedly.4 At the same time, however, in order to check an otherwise whole-hearted endorsement of these new writers' projects, she retains a measure of critical distance by calling into question that aspect most anathema to the dominant poetical conventions rooted in New Criticism — the political/Marxist claims of some of the poets under review.

"But is it poetry?" Perloff asks following three excerpts from Tina Darragh, Ron Silliman, and Charles Bernstein. Using a rhetoric which would both empathize with the befuddled reader confronted with this inaccessible poetry, as well as posit herself as the master scholar, Perloff's mock-Socratic method belies her own selective and limited understanding of the work in question. Tracking Tina Darragh's "'oilfish' to 'old chap for 'C'" in all its riddled etymological nuance, she comes up with the first proposition of Language writing: word play. "How curious, the text suggests, the vagaries of *words* that can, with the shift of a single phoneme or two, mean such different things. ..." What she leaves out in that reductive reading is how process is the producer in Darragh's work.5 The alphabetic logic of the OED, the arsenal of the English language, is manipulated by Darragh to generate a new logic without attempting to conceal the production of meaning.

The undermining of normative syntax is Perloff's second attribution, here demonstrated with Bernstein's poem, "Sheds of our Webs," from the collection entitled *Resistance*. "But isn't the function of syntax precisely to tell us which of these possible meanings is the appropriate one in the context?" Perloff extracts the kernel from the morass, so that this poem "becomes a way of foregrounding the human need to escape confinement."

Perloff elucidates, with the help of Bernstein's critical work, the basic ideas of language and writing behind this tendency. Putting to the test the central theoretical assumptions — i.e., what it means to be "language-centered" — the decentered subject, the blurring of genres, the rights of the signifier and the Marxist claims, Perloff exposes her own conservative reading habits. By comparing seven sentences of Ron Silliman's book-length prose-poem, *Tjanting,* to a prize-winning Galway Kinnell lyric, Perloff attempts to show "what the rejection of 'the idea of the individual voice as a privileged structure' mean[s] in practice." The two examples are so utterly distinct in every aspect of the writing, that her explanation of the peripheral speaking subject in Silliman's writing offers little of insight and relies on prescription: "But Silliman's 'performance piece' will not allow us to read his text as a novel with a cast of characters, having such and such psychological traits. ... Indeed, the 'real' and the 'imaginary' inevitably fuse."

Still, she maintains her position as the arbiter of validity, providing a mode of access to this writing, rather than a well-informed or argued analysis of the works' cultural functions. When she does step out of her English don's robes, the best she can do is to conflate the Communism of the Cold War with the intellectual Marxism professed by a number of these writers. "But even then the question remains whether the calling into question of 'normal' language rules, or received discourses that I have been describing is a meaningful critique of capitalism. ... Where does the rise of communism fit into this picture? Is Silliman implying that in contemporary China, 'the optical illusion of realism' has given way to a valorization of 'gestural poetic forms'? Or isn't the very opposite the case in countries that can only tolerate socialist realism?"

If anything, Perloff's attempts at "deciphering" these texts demonstrate the inapplicability of such an approach. The "non-absorptive"6 elements of these modes of writing resist such traditional hermeneusis, and while tracking the mechanisms, line-by-line, might clarify one way of approaching them, the value ascribed by this sort of mediation is at best phonological, and at worst, stultifying.7 When Perloff tells "us" what "we" think in encountering works such as these, she is operating out of a critical paradigm utterly at odds with the intentions of these writers. Addressing the "writerly" strategies of these texts, she nevertheless is required to solve the "hermeneutic puzzle." This reveals more about the critical apparatus and the production of "taste" than about the project of these writers. The "work in the world,"8 the structural analogies which contribute to an understanding of its possible cultural function, places an aesthetic object in a frame which could, rather than deny its material existence in the world, engage itself in an intersubjective "dialogue" with the forces which enter into the production of meaning. To ascribe these "new" strategies of expression to a "self [trying] to find some ordering principle that might contain the particulars of experience ..." reduces, in this case, Tom Raworth's poem, *Writing*, to a stream of consciousness exercise, according to Perloff's own ordering principles, those which she tells us makes "perfectly good sense."

It is a dangerous proposition Perloff makes in foregrounding the "word as such," and it is one made frequently in the considerations of the work of these poets. She attempts a critique of the issue of referentiality, drawing on Jackson MacLow's essay, "Language-Centered": "what could be more of a fetish or more alienated than slices of language stripped of reference?" Perloff seconds him, "Precisely." Setting MacLow up as the "older (and perhaps wiser)" poetic precursor, she neglects to mention the fact that MacLow's essay, "Language-Centered" was supported by the editors of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*9, and was more clarifying than combative, referring to a claim put forth by Steve McCaffery in 1976. McCaffrey's "counter-communicative" analysis, as discussed above, took as its examples the earlier, minimalist and concretist works featured in Silliman's *Alcheringa* collection. That Perloff solicits MacLow's criticism in this manner reveals a misunderstanding both of the semiotic intent of the writers and the alterations in strategy which took place in the subsequent years. Here, it is important to recall Silliman's 1975 statement, "Words, finally, are not non-referential" (*Alcheringa*).

Her anaylsis of the so-called Marxism of some of the writers takes to task Ron Silliman's arguably reductive consideration of capitalism's commodification of the word, yet applies it, inappropriately, to modern-day Communist countries such as China. "For one thing, what the Language poets call late monopoly capitalism is never compared to the economic system of existing Marxist countries — the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and their satellites." Perloff's sense of Marxism is incredibly naïve and ahistorical when she asks, "Where does the rise of communism fit into this picture?" Overlooking the historical pertinence of the Russian Futurists from whom she takes her title, "The Word as Such," Perloff relies on the Cold War bipolarity which willfully conflates "communism" with "socialist realism" and pairs them under a repressive Stalinism. The utopian drive which undergirds the project cannot be discounted with the facility Perloff imagines. Promoting the group to a mainstream audience, assimilating this tendency into "the poetic," requires a dismissal of their "subversive" politics, to tailor them to the canon of American poetry.

Rather than making a more pertinent example of the bourgeois assumptions in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, Perloff instead extols its virtues by inscribing it with an unself-conscious humanism that is more reprehensible than any claims made by Silliman: "Hejinian's strategy is to create a language field that could be anybody's autobiography, a kind of Collective Unconscious whose language we all recognize. ... At the same time, *My Life* conveys what the archetypal life of a young American girl, is like. ..." This is just the most obvious example of Perloff's inclination to locate a larger narrative frame for these works which resist local fields of reference in order to position these otherwise "difficult" texts in a universal mode.

So, the answer to "Is it poetry?" seems to be yes, by Perloff's standards, having explicated the various propositions and devices, demonstrating how they function towards a "meaning" which, in

the end, is not so frightening as the "word as such" might appear on the surface. But the question itself is problematic. Perloff's review, in its attempt to legitimate this writing for a "mainstream," possibly even for "the culture at large," simultaneously supports and undermines them, reinforcing certain canonical terms, and thereby defuses by rendering digestible an "avant-garde" poetics for a conventional reading public.

In the Summer 1986 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, Lee Bartlett also attempted to describe "What is 'Language Poetry'?" For Bartlett, aside from the theoretical originality of the Language poets' "disposition," "[t]he impulse behind much of this material, it seems to me, is as much a reaction against a prevailing aesthetic, an attempt to provide a critique of the American 'workshop poem,' as anything else." The interdependence of the critical industry is obvious in Bartlett's reliance on Perloff's *APR* article, now two years old, even going so far as to quote Silliman's critique of capitalism, following it with a stamp of approval from Perloff, "This is, as Perloff notes, the classic Marxist position." Attempting to address the broader political horizons critiqued by the group, critics such as Bartlett and Perloff consistently otherize the leftist tendencies of these poets. Taking poems from the issue of *APR* in which Perloff's article appeared, Bartlett gives examples of the type of workshop poem that the Language poets are out to debunk."The issue is not then, reference per se, but a reaction to the prevailing poetics which seems to be unaware of the social implications which hover just above its acceptance as a first given on an unquestioning referentiality."

He offers no comparative textual examples of the poets he takes as his subject, other than excerpts of their theoretical essays, concluding that, "even if the group is theoretically top-heavy ... as an ongoing corrective to the prevailing workshop aesthetic it serves as an important irritant in its unwillingness to let us deny the myriad mysteries embedded in the very fabric of the poem." Compared to Perloff's domestication of their work, Bartlett seems to be unwilling to clarify the top-heaviness of this group with even a bare selection of what "myriad mysteries" they might provide aside from their convoluted and densely intellectual expository style. Burying a disclaimer from Silliman in a footnote, which reads, "In fact, Silliman argues that this charge, often made, is unfair," Bartlett's brief introduction, overly endebted to Perloff's critical authority, recognizes Language poetry's importance as a new literary force, yet by ignoring the poetic work, perpetuates this "unfair" charge, as well as the tendency to dismiss this "irritant" as useful, but not "poetic."

These two articles evidence the ways in which the Language project became domesticated by critics who intervened in the group's own attempts at self-definition through various reductions and distortions. But it is also indicative of the poets' inability, on the one hand, to control their reception, and on the other hand, to compose an adequate counter-argument to deflect critics such as Perloff and Bartlett. Responding to these critics with the terms already assigned, or else summoning up "community," Language poetry ultimately failed to provide a cogent alternative which might do justice to the diversity of the thought and work produced by the individuals.10

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1 Silliman, "for *Open Letter*," 1976.

2 *Ironwood* 20, 1982. The essay which follows Silliman's collection, Kathleen Fraser's "Partial Local Coherence," gives a "woman's perspective" of the language movement in San Francisco, and functions strategically to both present a critique of Language poetry from a woman writer's own agenda, yet also strengthens their position in its appearance as an addendum.

3 published by Southern Illinois University Press, which later published Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax*, Bob Perelman's *Writing/Talks* and Charles Bernstein's *Content's Dream*. The imprint of a university press guaranteed them an audience of a particular intellectual sensibility, providing access to the institutional apparatus whose reproduction of certain traditions they actively criticized.

4 Yeats becomes the literary yardstick when Perloff says things such as, "One thinks of Yeats's "The Second Coming," or "Messerli's syntax has no truck with what Yeats called "the natural words in the natural order," or 'In a world /Riddled/with riot' (a play on Yeats's Riddled with light' in 'The Cold Heaven')."

5 see Darragh's "on writing procedures" in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 2:7, March 1979: "take what is at hand (the dictionary), pick a page at random, use the key words heading the page as "directions," find a pattern and/or flow of the words and write it down, tyring to retain as much of the procedure as possible in the prose. ... what interests me is the coincidence and suxtaposition of the words on

the page in their natural formation (alphabetical order) in reference to each other, they have a story of their own.

6 to use a term from Charles Bernstein's important essay/poem, "The Artifice of Absorption," first published in *Paper Air*, 1987, and reprinted in *A Poetics*, Harvard University Press, 1991.

7 In many ways, Ron Silliman's attempts at "rescuing" certain writers from obscurity falls into the same trap. His tactic relies on the same structures of sense, but in a "new" frame of reference, one based on language devices, incorporating the work of his fellow comrades to legitimate them against the work under question, or vice versa. E.g., see his handling of Joe Ceravolo in "Migratory Meaning," *The New Sentence*, p. 109-124, 1986. This perhaps is the dilemma of any attempt at building a new readership for neglected work.

8 see Barrett Watten's "Total Syntax," *Total Syntax*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

9 The editors' note reads: "In this piece MacLow criticizes terms which we also feel tend to inhibit understanding of the work they attempt to characterize. We hope this reiteration will underscore the fact that these *are not our terms.*" (my emphasis) *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, 1981.

10 see *Social Text* Manifesto, 1988.

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