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Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement

Inclusions

One troubling aspect of privileging language as the primary site to torque new meaning and possibility is that it is severed from the political question of for whom new meaning is produced. ... I would suggest that it is important to think how writing can begin to develop among oppositional groups, how writing can begin to have social existence in a world where authority has become highly mobile, based less on identity and on barely discerned or discussed relationships.¹

The selective memory of history is often cause enough for rewritings, repositionings aiming to locate ignored truths or to shift points of emphasis towards corners willfully erased or mistakenly elided. To write about a movement is in itself a concessionary undertaking, as it requires certain assumptions to be made in order to service a streamlined narrative. A group of individuals in a certain moment in time become somehow agglomerated into a coherent mass which then becomes objectified by name, place, and date of birth. The impulse behind this investigation, however, is one embedded in the present and conditioned by the recent past, which is itself not yet conclusive.

With the appearance of Erica Hunt's first book, *Local History*, in 1993, I feel as if Language poetry as a movement has either reached an apt close, or else is witnessing a new beginning. Perhaps one which would find affinity with the "Writing from the New Coast,"² those writers who are marginalized by both the "mainstream" and the "marginal," who are themselves implicated in the discovery of a new space for poetry. Hunt's activities aside from her writing practice are varied, and she is socially committed on a number of fronts, yet at the risk of tokenization, it seems as if her peripheral position in relation to the movement, even as she maintained a consistent presence in the group representations, has finally achieved full articulation with the publication of this book.

In the alternative poetry communities at universities such as Brown, SUNY Buffalo, or San Francisco State, published in small magazines such as *Tembler*, *Avec*, *Talisman*, *o.blek* and *Sulfur*, the reputation of Language poetry and its influence became a measure for the reception or neglect of other experimental poetics being written then and now. What Language poetry may have done is drawn attention back to the activities of the poetic left, to writers coming out of the second generation of the New Americans, by making explicit the oppositional aspect of their poetics, by overstating, and perhaps overestimating the potential for change in the genre and education of poetry. What *has* happened is the facile rendering of crude binary map pitting the New Formalists (e.g., Brad Leithhauser, Marilyn Hacker) against the Language poets, one side representing extreme right-wing conservatives, the other left-wing ideologues.³ These two groups have in recent years been posited as the dominant strands of academic poetry, providing little in between, excepting John Ashbery's laureled position as overseer of the postmodern lyric. Whereas the New Formalists (after the agrarian Eliot and the Fugitives) attempt to redeem order from the chaos of modern existence through formal strictures, the Language poets' central strategy is a critique of the unitary subject as well as structures of power through the implications of language as a system of signs, using avant-garde techniques of deformation and defamiliarization.

From another vantage point, however, it can also be said that through the articulations and the antagonisms provoked by Language poetry, the collective belief of a new generation became an actual shift in the consideration of poetry. Their "newness" is debatable and many of these writers locate themselves within a continuum of the modernist experimental drive, the historical avant-garde negotiations of politics and poetry, rather than with any speculative narratives of postmodernity. The danger of intensifying the neglect of other producers on the margins through representations of this formation as *the* radical tradition is apparent, as is the ensuing rejection by

contemporaries of a group which perhaps seemed more of a Socialist party than a social gathering.

Nevertheless, in the continual push to renew poetry and make it relevant to the present, to use language which can be both individual and collective, to liberate consciousness from the language of control and domination, Language poetry's contribution is impossible to ignore. The double danger of using it as a catch-all term for any "difficult" writing which does not take language for granted, and of ascribing all current writing to its "ground-breaking" work, must be avoided. If anything, this thesis is an attempt to negotiate those two words, designating a problematic field in a complex set of relations, so that the reader may then find a way to both approach the writing and also to use the words with care. How the term accrued the connotations it did is perhaps the first step in then considering a "better" way to think of the individuals historically, and the ways in which reputations in poetry are made, the role of the critic and the importance of community. And also how changes in the social are militating a new, less abstract pluralistic community, one in which tradition might be a looser term, tempering the factionalism associated with "claimed" traditions, one in which the personal could, rather than aspire only to the political, strive also for the plural.

The insistence on community in the cohesion of the Language poetry formation fell into current debates over identity politics and the assumptions of homogeneity that the term "community" connotes. Ron Silliman amended his *Socialist Review* foible with an explanation of his broad based democratic vision, an anti-hierarchical structure which might present a viable counter-hegemonic option to the "cultural logic of late capitalism."⁴ Despite the ideological quandaries inherent in any attempt at social reconstruction, it is undeniable that the conditions which brought about the movement, the community ethic, and the production of belief, were reproduced through rearticulations and rehearsals of the originating antagonisms, radiating in centrifugal fashion until the final absorption into the university structure.⁵ With the expanding range of influence, however, the group successfully insured a transmission of knowledge which depended on the primary conflict which brought them into being.

The conceptualization and realization of a poetics of opposition is one of the most encouraging and exciting contributions that Language poetry of the last two decades has provided. The obvious difficulties and problematics which an abstract political poetry faces are a self-indulgent high aestheticism, a defusion of counter-hegemonic strategies by "repressive desublimation" or assimilation into the culture industry, especially via patriarchal narratives of literary "progress," postmodernism, etc.

The creation of a community, of a shared space for articulation, and the control of the means of production were all indispensable to the formation and the self-definition of the group. When the generative conditions, however, became conflated with the actual social work being claimed by proponents such as Silliman, the ethos of community then failed to provide an adequate vision of the political horizon. Under pressure to more clearly delineate their own project and to maintain a level of critical control, Language poetry could not do so without excluding or antagonizing other extra-institutional formations.

The Cold War mentality propagated through increasingly deplorable government policies, having reached an apotheosis of sorts in the televised spectre of Reagan, sustained a binarism against which Language poetry asserted a political poetic pluralism. Maintaining a fiercely oppositional stance to the status quo, however, restricted them to a dissident, yet adherent, relationship to the established order. Against the "postmodern" landscape of "flexible accumulation" outlined by David Harvey,⁶ local formations which emerge out of newly decentralized power configurations, in lacking a vision for global resistance, court the danger of "reinforcing the fragmentations and reifications" (281). This in turn sacrifices the potential of radical democratic formations like the Language group, inverting them into what might be regarded as a conservative isolationism.

The recent death of Richard Nixon signifies the banishment of the Cold War psychology, that which shaped the dissident consciousness sustained by this group. It was against the ideological control imposed by a brute nationalism that the Language project was articulated, emerging in a heterogenous field which located them in an uncomfortably dominant position. For the Language poets, "community" fostered both the security of a network and the maintenance of the alienating conditions which first brought this group of individuals together. Like other utopian projects, the Language group, organized around hopes for social transformation yet unable to activate change towards radical inclusion, could only dissolve as personal successes diminished the imperatives of political idealism.

1 Hunt, Erica, "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," originally a talk given in 1984 at a "Politics & Language" forum, reprinted in Bernstein, *The Politics of Poetic Form*, Roof, 1993, p. 204.

2 *o.blek* 12, 1994.

3 see Gilbert, Roger, "Textured Information: Politics, Pleasure and Poetry in the Eighties," *Contemporary Literature*. 33:2, 1992 and Contes, Joseph, "A Polemical Conclusion," *Unending Designs*, Cornell, 1991.

4 see my discussion of the Silliman/Scalapino exchange, "What/Person," *Poetics Journal*, 1990.

5 Bob Perelman, in the *Voice Literary Supplement* interview, November 1993, states, "The communal values are hard to keep in the forefront — sometimes it's just me and my job." His job being a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania.

6 "Flexible Accumulation Through Urbanization: Reflections on 'Post-modernism' in the American City," *Antipode*, 19: 260-286, 1987.

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