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Marjorie Perloff

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Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent:
The Case of Language Poetry

Marjorie PERLOFF
Stanford University

The term avant-garde, we sometimes forget, was originally a military metaphor: it referred to the front flank of the army, the forerunners in battle who paved the way for the rest (see Calinescu 98-99). The avant-garde is thus, by definition, ahead of its time. But not in an evolutionary sense, for the avant-garde is also invariably oppositional: in Peter Bürger’s now famous words, “It radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art” (51). For Bürger, moreover, as for such earlier students of the avant-garde as Renato Poggioli, the term avant-garde invariably refers to group formations—to those eager bands of brothers (or sisters) who collaborate to overturn the status quo of the bourgeois Establishment.

But the identification of avant-garde with movements is not without its problems. The artist usually considered the quintessential avant-gardist,
Marcel Duchamp, never quite belonged to any group: as he told his young protégée Ettie Stettheimer in 1921, “From a distance these things, these Movements take on a charm that they do not have close up—I assure you” (Kuenzli 220). And the most radical American writer of the early twentieth century was one who disliked literary movements, belonged to no cenacle, and participated in no group manifestos or activities. I am thinking, of course, of Gertrude Stein, whose salon was frequented by many of the leading avant-gardists—Apollinaire, Picabia, Pound—but whose strongest allegiance was neither to other avant-garde women writers (most of whom she treated dismissively), nor to gay poets, much less to fellow Americans, but to that great modernist aggressively heterosexual male painter—Picasso. Was Stein then “avant-garde” without being part of a movement? Was Joyce? This last question is wittily raised in Tom Stoppard’s play Travesties, where Lenin, Joyce, and Tristan Tzara, all living in Zurich in the mid 1910s, meet. Whose, in this case, is the “real” revolution? And, when we turn to the post-World War II avant-gardes, where do we place Beckett, whose works were originally perceived as shocking and incomprehensible? In what avant-garde movement did this extraordinary avant-gardist participate?

The concept of individual genius, it seems, dies hard. Does this mean that the term avant-garde has become meaningless? Not at all. The dialectic between individual artist and avant-garde groups is seminal to twentieth-century art-making. But not every “movement” is an avant-garde and not every avant-garde poet or artist is associated with a movement. What we need, it seems, is a more accurate genealogy of avant-garde practices than we now have. In what follows, I wish to consider a particular avant-garde movement that has remained powerful—but also quite controversial—ever since its inception in the early 1970s—namely, Language poetry, sometimes also placed, together with related practices, under the umbrella of “experimental writing” or “innovative poetry.”

The trajectory of the Language movement raises particularly knotty questions about avant-garde practices. Are the “second-generation language poets,” many of them graduates of the Buffalo Poetics program, founded by Charles Bernstein, themselves avant-gardists? Or is Language poetry already passé, replaced by a newer and genuinely different avant-garde formation? Or, as mainstream poets and critics insist, was the Language movement never more than a pretentious gesture—a movement most of whose members remain unrecognized by anthologists, unreviewed in the important periodicals, and passed over for all the literary prizes? And finally—to come back to the question I raised vis-à-vis Duchamp and Stein—is Language poetry in fact the achievement of a few poets who theorized its aims and methods, or would the turn toward an asemantic, asyntactic poetry have occurred in any case?
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In order to frame this discussion, it will be useful to distinguish between the various avant-garde paradigms that held sway in the course of the twentieth century. Two cautions are in order vis-à-vis the classification that follows. First, for reasons of expertise as well as space, I restrict myself to the (largely American and Western European) verbal and visual arts. And second, the classification is meant to be suggestive rather than definitive. Obviously other criteria would yield other genealogies.

Avant-Garde and community

(1) The prototypical avant-garde was a movement that brought together genuinely like-minded artists, whose group commitment was to the overthrow of the dominant aesthetic values of their culture and to the making of artworks that were genuinely new and revolutionary—works that would be consonant with the new technology, science, and philosophy. The key example—and I take this to be the great avant-garde of the past century—was the Russian avant-garde from 1912 or so to the mid-twenties. The poets, painters, sculptors, photographers, makers of artist books and performances—Goncharova, Malevich, Tatlin, Khlengnikov, Krushchonikh, Mayakovsky—later, Rodchenko, Lissitsky, Meyerhold—were in accord on basic avant-garde principles, especially in their drive toward a non-representational art and poetry and the concomitant emphasis on faktura (the material base of the text or artwork), sdvig (the orientation toward the neighboring word), and ostranenie (defamiliarization). An artist like Malevich was identified with a larger group, and yet he also stood on his own as a great early Modernist artist, transcending that group identity. Note that his own “movement” Suprematism was a one-man operation: Malevich, after all, was the only Suprematist.

Surrealism and German Expressionism are examples of avant-gardes that similarly fused shared aesthetic values and individual development, but neither movement involved the rupture we associate with the Russian avant-garde. Surrealism was a natural outgrowth of Dada revolt and of Freudian theories of the subconscious, even as German Expressionism can increasingly be seen as continuous with the Decadence of the 1890s, Edvard Munch providing a key link between the two. But certainly such notable surrealists as André Breton and Max Ernst had a life outside and beyond their particular cenacles even as Kandinsky rapidly moved beyond his early Expressionist affiliations to create his own unique identity.

(2) A variation on #1 is the movement whose group ethos was strong and whose aesthetics and politics were highly integrated and articulated, but whose individual members did not come to be regarded as major modernist
artists. Here Italian Futurism is a key example: although the visual artists—Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carra, Antonio St. Elia—produced outstanding and highly original works, and although the Italian Futurists more or less invented forms like the manifesto, performance art, and innovative typography, Futurism’s literary contribution was weak. The movement’s chef d’école F.T. Marinetti is known today as the inventor of parole in libertà and for the brilliant conjunctions of what he called “violence and precision” in his manifestos, but his poetry and fiction have never really caught on. In Italian Futurism the movement thus exceeded the artist. Its great strength was its “revolutionizing” of so many media—photography, film, architecture, poetry, fiction, drama. But its politics, which hardened in the course of the 20s into a proto-Fascism, undercut the reception of even these advances.

Zurich Dada had a related trajectory. We think of the Cabaret Voltaire as producing the quintessential avant-garde, the ultimate contrarian spirit of revolt in all its wit and wonder, but however colorful and intriguing the personalities, performances, and manifestos of its polyglot expatriate members—Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck—these Dadaists have never been taken quite seriously as poets. When, at war’s end, the movement broke up, many of the individuals floundered, while others like Hans Arp were soon associated with other movements. Meanwhile, the term Hanover Dada refers to the work of a single great artist, Kurt Schwitters, whereas Berlin Dada, now very popular in academic circles because of its radical left politics, is hardly “Dada” at all, the graphics and paintings of John Heartfield, Raoul Haussmann, and George Grosz are vicious satires on war and postwar capitalism that carry forward the lessons of German Expressionism. Didactic and ideological in intent, these works have left behind the anarchy and non-sensicality of the Cabaret Voltaire.¹

(3) The antithesis of a community like Zurich Dada is the avant-garde in which a congeries of disciples and acolytes gathers around a central charismatic figure. New York Dada, which I spoke of earlier, is a case in point. Guy Debord’s Situationism was another—a movement that would have been nothing without its leader. Imagism and Vorticism, sometimes included under the avant-garde rubric, would have been negligible without the presence of Ezra Pound and possibly H.D. in the former, Wyndham Lewis in the latter. As soon as Pound’s Imagist credo had been diluted into what he called “amygisme” (for Amy Lowell), Pound blew the whistle on the use of the term and founded, together with Lewis, Vorticism, a movement now generally regarded as a footnote to Italian Futurism. But Pound, H.D., and Lewis emerged as important individual writers, who soon went on to produce ambitious works by no means covered by the Imagist or Vorticist label.

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(4) A fourth kind of avant-garde formation is the geographical. Black Mountain was a movement that depended on residence at Black Mountain College for its definition. Many fascinating artists passed through Black Mountain—from Joseph Albers to Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, from Buckminster Fuller to John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Allan Kaprow. The problem of geographical definition is that the avant-gardists in question had, as critics have now noted, little by way of a shared aesthetic. Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley were both followers of William Carlos Williams, but in neither case does the poetry have affinities with, say, the more political and narrative work of Ed Dorn, who was also an Olson student at the college. For a few years, the *Black Mountain Review* brought these poets together, but their group impetus was never strong.

A more prominent example of avant-garde as geographic community was the so-called New York School. As a designation for the abstract expressionist painters from Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko to Helen Frankenthaler and Franz Kline, all of whom were living and working in New York in the fifties, the term New York School makes sense, as it does for the Frank O’Hara circle of poets—Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and a large contingent of second generation New York schoolers like Ron Padgett, Ted Berrigan, and Bernadette Mayer. But New York is one thing, avant-garde another. David Lehman’s controversial book *The Last Avant-Garde* makes the case for O’Hara, Koch, Ashbery, and Schuyler (he omits Barbara Guest) as avant-gardists on the strength of their new colloquialism, spontaneity, defiance of fixed meters and forms, and the “new” relationship of the verbal to the visual arts. But both New York painting and poetry were soon seen as squarely in the Romantic and Modernist tradition. The New York school did not attack art as a bourgeois institution, nor did it call into question the centrality of painting and lyric poetry among the media. Ashbery, for that matter, always rejected the New York label, and his own poetry was soon seen as closer to Stevens, Eliot, and Auden than to the neo-Dada often attributed to New York school poetry. As for Lehman’s term “last avant-garde,” many critics, myself included, have objected strenuously to the word “last,” whose foreclosure of all further innovation is designed as a thinly veiled attack on Language poetry. Like the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance poets, the New York school was—and remains—an important community, but not, either by intention or outcome, a fully-fledged avant-garde.

(5) A variant on the communitarian model is the school or workshop, whose cardinal example today is *Oulipo*, the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, founded in France in 1960 by the French author Raymond Queneau and the mathematical historian François Le Lionnais. Made up of
mathematicians as well as writers, the group assigned itself the task of exploring how mathematical structures might be used in literary creation. This idea was soon broadened to include all highly restrictive procedural methods, like the palindrome and lipogram, that are strict enough to play a decisive role in determining what their users write. The most notorious example of this approach is Georges Perec’s novel, *La Disparition* (*A Void*), written without a single appearance of the letter e. Oulipo is thus a group project that observes particular rules and prohibitions. At the same time, its leading writers—Georges Perec and Jacques Roubaud—have produced highly individual work. Perec’s *La Vie mode d’emploi* (*Life a User’s Manual*), while based on Oulipo principles, is a picaresque hyperreal novel that speaks to readers who have never heard of the Paris workshop.

Oulipo is a bona-fide avant-garde in that it has, from its inception, radically questioned the very possibility of poetry or fiction as self-expression or invention. But its parameters are necessarily narrow, and the work is largely confined to the verbal medium, even though there are now subgroups with names like *Oupeintpo*, *Ouphopo*, and *Oumupo*. An Oulipo analogue on the visual arts side is Fluxus, which dates, like Oulipo, from the sixties. Like Oulipo, Fluxus was a movement bent on making “art” rooted in scientific and philosophical ideas, but codification was not its métier. Then too Fluxus was an international movement, fusing Dada and Zen elements to assert that all media and disciplines are fair game for combination and fusion, that indeed anything can be considered “art.” As such, Fluxus objects and performances would appear to be the antithesis of Oulipo villanelles and lipograms, but in fact Fluxus principles, its list of what Pound called “Don’ts,” as embodied in the work of artists and poets like George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, Jackson Mac Low, and Dick Higgins—may well be just as rigid as Oulipo ones. But in Fluxus, as in Dada, the movement has proved to be stronger than its individuals.

In recent years, ideological and identity-based movements have sometimes been labeled “avant-garde”: for example, the Black Arts movement, the feminist performance art of the ’70s, or the “new” Asian-American poetries. But the “breakthrough” of such movements tends to be short-lived, the aim of the groups concerned being ironically counter-avant-garde in their drive to win acceptance within the larger public art sphere. Once received into the canon, as has been the case with such representative figures as Teresa Hak Kyung Cha or Amiri Baraka in contemporary poetry circles, group identity is largely discarded.

Finally—and largely antithetical to all of the above—is the movement that doesn’t see itself as a movement at all but comes to be
considered one by outsiders and later generations because its artists share a particular aesthetic and possibly a politics as well. In the 60s in New York, there was a loose congerie of artists, composers, dancers, and poets more prominent than the second generation of the New York School although there was some overlap between the two. John Cage, who has already been mentioned vis-à-vis Black Mountain, and who was certainly the presiding spirit of Fluxus, the movement that was at least partially born in his seminars at the New School, was the center of an avant-garde that included Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Morton Feldman, David Tudor, Jackson Mac Low, and, on its margins, Frank O’Hara, and John Ashbery. The Swedish concrete poet/artist Oyvind Fahlström, who came to New York and collaborated with Rauschenberg, belongs to this group. The Cage circle was primarily, but not exclusively, a gay movement but its sexual thematics were heavily coded. Today, the conceptual artists in question have achieved a certain prominence but, with the exception of the painters and possibly Merce Cunningham, not quite full acceptance. A decade after his death, Cage (born 1912) is still considered a charlatan in many art circles even as Feldman and Tudor remain coterie composers, adored by their champions but unknown by the wider concert audience. To paraphrase Pound, this is an avant-garde that has stayed avant-garde.

“Word Order = World Order”?

What, then, of the Language movement, which was the most prominent American poetic avant-garde of the ’80s and ’90s? The genealogy of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, as Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein called their now famous little mimeo magazine, first published in 1978, must be understood in the context of the prevailing poetry culture of the time. In the U.S., it was the moment of burgeoning Workshop activity, poet after poet writing his or her “sincere,” sensitive, intimate, speech-based lyric, expressing particular nuances of emotion. Here, for example, is the prize-winning poet and a professor at the University of Virginia, Gregory Orr, memorializing his mother in a poem called “Haitian Suite”:

Hunched over a desk
in another house, I hear
the curtains rustle.

Again she stands behind me,
quiet and tall as a lamp,
while I push clumsy words
around on a page, trying
to make them fit. Closing
my eyes, I feel a summer
breeze warm as breath cross
my face, coming all the way
from a grave in Haiti.

The poem’s mode is an attenuated Romanticism, its Wordsworthian premise being that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility. But in “Haitian Suite,” the emotion communicated—grief for one’s dead mother—is rather pat, and it is too transparently put into what are modestly called the “clumsy words” of the poem—clumsiness being appropriate because it evidently underscores the depth of the poet’s actual feelings. Accordingly, the verse must be “natural” and “free,” the syntax that of the declarative sentence, the language accessible, and the imagery concrete (“I hear / the curtains rustle”). Metaphor is used sparingly but exactly: the mother’s ghost is “quiet and tall as a lamp,” because, of course, she provided the light that helped the poet to become a man.

The agonism of the avant-garde is usually directed, not at an earlier generation as would seem logical, but against the complacencies of one’s own. Barrett Watten, almost exactly the age of Gregory Orr and a graduate of the Iowa Writing Program, was living in Oakland in the early seventies and was editing, first with Robert Grenier, then after 1973 on his own, the little magazine This, whose very title suggests that poetry is not made of images but of words—and unlikely words at that. This published Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson and Steve Benson, Rae Armantrout and Lyn Hejinian. Its presiding spirit was a slightly older poet first associated with the New York school, whose radically asyntactical and densely semantic poetry became a model for the younger group—namely Clark Coolidge. One of Watten’s early essays, reprinted in his Total Syntax (1985), was a piece on the new syntactic possibilities raised by the work of Coolidge, Silliman, Benson, and Robert Smithson.

For Watten and his fellow Bay Area poets, the impetus for a “new” poetics was primarily political. In a recent essay called “The Turn to Language and the 1960s,” Watten argues that Language poetry owed its birth to the Berkeley Free Speech movement and the political revolution it unleashed. The valorization of speech, first a positive sign of the new counterculture, became dubious as writers came to regard natural speech as adequate to the conveyance of an agonistic politics. Even such talented poets as Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov, Watten posits, tried to express their horror at the Vietnam War in direct, experiential speech forms—forms that separated subjects as experiencing “selves” from the “history” they were trying to represent. By contrast, the younger poets of Watten’s own new movement understood that poetry must have a materialist base, that language and syntax must do the poem’s work. As Watten put it, “The language-centered poetics of the 1970s permitted the recovery of a totalized
outside that was a casualty of the conflict between expression and representation in the 1960s” (2002, 183).

Ingenious as this argument is, it does not withstand scrutiny. True, the poetry of Ginsberg, Levertov, Merwin, and other ’60s poets was rooted in a lyric subjectivity and transparency that could not quite come to terms with the atrocities perceived to be taking place. But Watten writes as if there had been no horrors to represent before the Vietnam War, whereas great war poetry had always taken what Watten calls the “constructivist” route. Consider Khlebnikov, whose last poems, dealing with the brutal famine produced by the Russian Civil War in the early 1920s, are short, ironic imagist lyrics that capture the horrors of war only too well. Or George Oppen, the Objectivist poet who has been one of the chief precursors of the Language movement, and whose long political/philosophical poem “Of Being Numerous” neither eradicates the speaking subject nor the possibilities of normative syntax.

If Watten’s argument is overstated, it nevertheless testifies to the characteristic avant-garde need to transform one’s immediate adversary—in this case the “natural” speech-based poetry dominant in the sixties—into a permanent condition and to make the case for one’s own oppositional circle as having some sort of avant-garde purity and priority. “We were,” so to speak, “the first that ever burst / into that silent sea.” A similar problem occurs—and I shall come back to this point—with the claim made by language poets that theirs was a unique attack on the capitalist reification and commodification of the sign, that only the blasting apart of the word and its referent could convey a meaningful critique of capitalism.

The Watten-Silliman circle did not yet use the term Language poetry, which officially came into being with the launch of the journal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E in 1978 and The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book in 1984. Here the principles of this particular avant-garde were laid out just as squarely as Marinetti had promulgated his call for the destruction of syntax and the abolition of all ego psychology in his pre-World War I manifestos, although the Language poets, operating in a more belated, self-conscious age, gave their prescriptions a more theoretical base than the Futurists could muster.

The first of the “Language” principles is perhaps most clearly articulated in Charles Bernstein’s “Stray Straws and Straw Men” (1977), which follows the Futurist format of numbered propositions so as to launch a witty attack on the aesthetic of “the natural look” then dominant in poetry:

17. Take it this way: I want to just write—let it come out—get in touch with some natural process—from brain to pen—with no interference of typewriter, formal pattern. & it can seem like the language itself—having to put it into words—any kind of fixing a version of it—gets in the way. That I just have this thing inside
me—silently—unconditioned by the choices I need to make when I write—whether it be to write it down or write on. So it is as if language itself gets in the way of expressing this thing, this flow, this movement of consciousness.

But there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it. Its conditions always interpose themselves: a particular set of words to choose from (a vocabulary), a way of processing those words (syntax, grammar): the natural condition of language […]

18. There is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is intended, chosen. That is what makes a thing a poem.

(1984, 44-45; 1986, 48-49)

Bernstein had studied Wittgenstein with Stanley Cavell at Harvard, and his notion that “there are no thoughts except through language,” is a version of Wittgenstein’s “The limits of language mean the limits of my world” (1992: §5.6), that “Language is not contiguous to anything else” (1980: 112). The articles of faith of 60’s poetry—Olson’s “Form is never more than the extension of content” and Ginsberg’s “First thought, best thought”—were thus overturned in a new call for poetry as making, construction—the importance of each and every word and especially of word order. But unlike the New Criticism, which demanded unified and centered structure, the “aura around a bright clear centre,” as Reuben Brower called it, the constructivist aesthetic of Language poetry insisted on the making process itself, in all its anti-closure, incompleteness, and indeterminacy.

“Stray Straws and Straw Men” was first published as part of a symposium called “The Politics of the Referent,” edited by Steve McCaffery, published in the Canadian journal Open Letter in 1977 and reprinted by Andrews and Bernstein as Language Supplement Number One in June 1980. McCaffery’s own essay, dramatically titled “The Death of the Subject,” provides a second major principle. “There is a group of writers today,” McCaffery begins, “united in the feeling that literature has entered a crisis of the sign […] and that the foremost task at hand—a more linguistic and philosophic then ‘poetic’ task—is to demystify the referential fallacy of language.” “Reference,” he adds, “is that kind of blindness a window makes of the pane it is, that motoric thrust of the word which takes you out of language into a tenuous world of the other and so prevents you seeing what it is you see” (1977, 1). Such a thrust—the removal of what McCaffery calls later in the essay “the arrow of reference”—is essential because “language is above all else a system of signs and […] writing must stress its semiotic nature through modes of investigation and probe, rather than mimetic, instrumental indications.”

Here, in a nutshell, is the animating principle of much of the poetry to come: poetic language is not a window, a transparent glass to be seen through in pursuit of the “real” objects outside it but a system of signs with its own semiological relationships. To put it another way, “Language is
material and primary and what’s experienced is the tension and relationship of letters and lettristic clusters, simultaneously struggling towards, yet refusing to become, significations.” McCaffery himself points to the Russian Formalists, to Wittgenstein, Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida as sources of his theory, and indeed language poetics, in this first stage, owes a great debt to French poststructuralism. And McCaffery sounds a Derridean note when he declares that “the empirical experience of a grapheme replaces what the signifier in a word will always try to discharge: its signified and referent.” Indeed, in poetry the signifier is always “superfluous,” overloaded with potential meanings and hence more properly a cipher (1980, 4).

The twin rejection of poetry as natural speech (Bernstein) and of poetry as a vehicle for the communication of a set of external meanings animates much of the theoretical writing of other language poets. In the Introduction to his In the American Tree (1986), Ron Silliman notes that the poets he has included in his anthology want to “renew verse itself, so that it might offer readers the same opacity, density, otherness, challenge and relevance persons find in the ‘real’ world.” And again, “What a poem is actually made of [is] not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or in one’s mouth only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself” (xiv). “Where once one sought a vocabulary for ideas,” writes Lyn Hejinian in “If Written is Writing,” “now one seeks ideas for vocabularies” (Andrews 29). And in “The Rejection of Closure”: “Language discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say” (48).

What Bernstein has dismissed as the “transom theory of communication” (the “two-way wire with the message shuttling back and forth in blissful ignorance of its transom”) is thus emphatically rejected. There are two corollaries, one Barthean, one Marxist-Althusserian. “Language-centered writing,” McCaffery tells us, “involves a major alteration in textual roles: of the socially defined functions of writer and reader as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis” (1980, 3). And again, “The text becomes the communal space of a labour, initiated by the writer and extended by the second writer (the reader) […] The old duality of reader-writer collapses into the one compound function, and the two actions are permitted to become a simultaneous experience within the activity of the engager” (1980, 8). “Reading” is thus “an alternative or additional writing of the text.” “The ‘open text’” as Hejinian puts it, “by definition is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and
control as a motive” (2000, 43). Indeed—and here the Marxist motif kicks in—“to remove the arrow of reference,” to “short-circuit the semiotic loop” (McCaffery, 1980, 9) is a political as well as an aesthetic act. For, in Silliman’s words, “Under capitalism, reference is transformed (deformed) into referentiality” (Andrews 125). In “Text and Context,” Bruce Andrews reinforces this notion, dismissing referentiality as the misguided “search for the pot at the end of the rainbow, the commodity or ideology that brings fulfillment” (McCaffery 1980, 20). Our public language, so the argument goes, is so debased, so formulaic, so cliché-ridden, that poetry must resist its reification by blowing apart its phraseology and syntax, to reassert the complexity and untranslatability of poetic language.8

The four principles I have cited—(1) poetry is not “natural” speech but, on the contrary, something carefully constructed; (2) poetry rejects the “referential fallacy” in favor of the play of signifiers that are suggestive and multivalent; (3) poetry relinquishes its author’s control over the text, functioning instead as a “communal space of labor”; and (4) poetry has no place for the direct communication of information, which is the hallmark of the commodity fetish—were, of course, never designed to be as doctrinaire as I have made them sound here. There was always a good deal of variation and controversy within the Language community and especially between its East and West Coast branches. Still, these basic principles give the movement its general tone, and they are usually accompanied by two further axioms, although these are less intrinsic than practical.

First poetry could—and often should—be written as prose—not ordinary prose, of course, but what Silliman named “the New Sentence” best exemplified in his own Ketjak and Tjanting as well as in Lyn Hejinian’s My Life, where a given sentence never “follows” logically or sequentially from its predecessor and yet is related to all the other sentences by careful orchestration of leitmotifs, phrases, and numerical constraints. “New sentences,” as Bob Perelman explains Silliman’s concept, “are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. [. . .] the new sentence arises out of an attempt to redefine genres; the tension between parataxis and narrative is basic. Among other things, Silliman wanted to escape the problems of the novel, which for him were of a piece with the larger problems of capitalism” (61).

Perelman, writing in the mid-90s, acknowledges that the latter generalization won’t really hold: “Today parataxis can seem symptomatic of late capitalism rather than oppositional. Ads where fast cuts from all ‘walks of life’ demonstrate the ubiquity and omniscience of AT&T are paratactic” (62). Still, he posits, the “new sentence” is a useful tool: “First, it is arbitrary, driving a wedge between any expressive identity of form and content.” And “to use the sentence as basic unit rather than the line is to orient the writing...
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toward ordinary language use” (65). In breaking up the continuity of lyric voice as well as the “smooth narrative plane” (78), the “new sentence” has been, so Perelman posits, an important element in language poetics.

A second ancillary principle, implicit in all those I have cited thus far, is that poetry incorporates its own poetics, that it has a theoretical base. Perelman’s own “Marginalization of Poetry,” Bernstein’s “Artifice of Absorption,” Susan Howe’s My Emily Dickinson and Melville’s Marginalia, Rosmarie Waldrop’s Reluctant Gravities—all these are works that use poetic figuration and structure to present a particular poetics as well. As such, theorypo or poetheory as we might call it, was positioned as the very antithesis of the epiphanic lyric of the Writing Workshop.

Language Poetry thus presented itself as a decisive rupture with the poetic status quo, a distinctive way of Making It New. In the hands of its main practitioners, it produced a series of long poems that are now classics of a sort, from Bernstein’s “Dysraphism” to Hejinian’s My Life, Silliman’s Tjanting, McCaffery’s Lag, and Howe’s Thorow. Meanwhile, a host of other poets contributed short essays and reviews to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and to such related journals as Roof, Hills, Jimmy and Lucy’s House of K, Temblor, Raddle Moon, Writing, and How(ever) (now the online journal How To). And anthologies like Silliman’s In the American Tree (1986) and Mary Margaret Sloan’s Moving Borders (1998) append a back section with sizable statements of poetics by the authors included. Thus, although Language poetry has never gained acceptance from the mainstream press—even Bernstein has never been reviewed in The New York Times Book Review or The New York Review of Books—and has been largely kept out of the loop of the prize, award, and fellowship cycle, its impact has been far-reaching. Students from Finland and Germany, Portugal and Japan have come to Buffalo to study in the Poetics Program and have returned to their own communities with new modes and strategies. In Australia and New Zealand, as in Brazil, Language Poetry became a kind of watchword and is perhaps the key influence on the “new” poetics of these nations. In the U.S., U.K., and Canada, My Life, Howe’s Thorow, Bernstein’s With Strings, and McCaffery’s Panopticon are taught in college classrooms, and a number of scholarly books—by Ann Vickery, Juliana Spahr, Elizabeth Frost—already appeared on feminist language poetries and other facets of the “new poetics.” Graduates of the Poetics Program and related programs at Brown, Berkeley, and the University of Pennsylvania have infiltrated the university literature and Creative Writing classrooms and are accordingly introducing Language poets to undergraduates who assume, not surprisingly, that these poets have always been there.

The big lesson learned from Language Poetry, I would argue, has been that, contemporary pop culture notwithstanding, poetry matters, that it is not just a craft for sensitive spirits who wish to express themselves but an
intellectual discipline dealing with the most pressing philosophical and cultural issues of the day. As such—and this is especially striking to me—the “new” poetics have made subtle inroads into the very mainstream poetries that have scorned it. In the fashionable new journal *Fence*, for example—a journal by no means devoted to Language poetry—one now reads prose poems like the following:

[Meanwhile the grove tree...]

Meanwhile the grove tree ejaculates baby mandarins. Middle branches, just beyond the approachable hand. Among them recur one or two of obscene glamour. The rest appear no more lucent than noodle shop formica. Be patient, be a member. They will gather up in late summer’s humid belly and rot. They will drop and not bounce. Pick up one that is crow-black. Carry it as talisman.

(*Fence* 50)

This is the first of a three-poem sequence by a young poet named Ted Mathys, who is described in the contributors’ notes as a graduate of Carleton College currently living in Hong Kong. If Mathys’s are not quite “new sentences,” the poem nevertheless works hard at being oblique and avoiding all first-person commentary. No direct treatment of the thing here! No identifiable or consistent persona! And the language is purposely “enigmatic.” Why, for starters, refer to a tree as a “grove tree” without the necessary adjective, as in orange grove or magnolia grove? And does the verb “ejaculates” really describe how the tree sheds its ripe mandarin oranges? Never mind, the verb “ejaculates” sexes things up: no ordinary fruit fall in this landscape. The “grove tree’s” fruit, moreover, is described as out of reach, not, as would be logical, of the “approaching” hand but of an “approachable” one, as if to say that the orange should have the volition to understand that this particular hand has its best interests at heart. Again, some sort of sexual contact is implied. And why do some mandarin oranges have “obscene glamour”? Glamour, evidently, because “mandarin” connotes the exotic East although the fact is that mandarin oranges are not particularly attractive and are hardier than normal oranges. The reference to their “obscenity” thus falls rather flat, especially since the next sentence oddly shifts from the semiotic play of what precedes it, giving us a good old-fashioned metaphor: the other mandarins are “no more lucent than noodle shop formica”—in other words as dull and opaque as cheap formica. But what do noodle shops have to do with anything here? And who is being told to “be patient, be a member”? A member of what? We only know that the overripe and hence rotten little orange, the crow-black one that dropped in “summer’s humid belly,” become the poet’s talisman. And this talisman theme is reinforced by the “black mandarin’s” reappearance in poems 2 and 3, evidently symbolizing the power of the unlikely, the undesirable, the reject to enrich our lives.

Mathys’s little poem thus follows the poetics laid out in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. The irresolution and mutivalency of its
words and images is designed to be “non-absorptive”; the lines of direct communication are broken down. It avoids the lyric first person, focusing on what is seen and understood without reference to the poet’s personal life or ideas. It is written in prose, not verse, and especially in the third poem, “Then the synesthetes. . .”, it claims access to theoretical issues, alluding to Rimbaud’s demand for “derangement and fairy juice” and Kandinsky and Liszt’s “tast[ing of] a plate of chords and strokes.” Even the title “Then the synesthetes” would seem to speak to a sophisticated poetic audience.

Surely the founders of the Language movement could not have anticipated that, within twenty years, the case against “the natural look,” the authoritative Cartesian subject, the transparency of meaning, and the use of “old-fashioned lineation” (much less meter) rather than the “new sentence” would become mere items to be ticked off on the “How To Make It New” list, that the “innovative” writing produced in the Workshop—now often a theory workshop as well as a place to practice one’s poetic craft—would become just as tedious and formulaic as the Workshop poetry it had once spurned. Indeed, the epithets innovative, experimental, alternative, radical—not to mention avant-garde—are now so reified in their own right that one sometimes finds oneself longing for a transparent nature lyric or love sonnet, preferably one with lots of rhyme, repetition, and refrain.

How did things come to such a pass? At the most immediate level, the problem is simply temporal: no avant-garde cenacle can keep up its momentum for three decades. Then, too, the absorption of Language poetry into the academy inevitably meant that the application of its principles would be codified, watered down, and misunderstood by what Pound called “the diluters,” those who follow the inventors and masters of a given mode, “produc[ing] something of lower intensity, some flabbier variant” (23). But there is something else. By 1990 or so, the fighting principles of Language poetry—principles I have here been outlining—ran into the juggernaut of Political Correctness. The demand for inclusiveness, for more women and especially minority poets, meant that candidates began to qualify as bona fide “language poets” on what were in fact extra-aesthetic grounds. Whereas a related movement like Oulipo never changed its rules, demanding a particular expertise and outlook from all its members, Language poetry was now pressed to be inclusive, not to mention polite, tolerant, and fair-minded. Readings began to balance Language Poet X with mainstream poet Y, established poet X with novice Y, even as publication series like the University of California Poetry Series felt they had to offset the difficulties of Lyn Hejinian with the more transparent lyrics of Carol Snow, and so on. Something for everybody (we hope!): this is the mantra.

How does this turn of events compare to the trajectory of other avant-gardes? In the early twentieth century, the avant-garde was likely to meet its
dissolution in the face of war or some form of political crackdown. The Russian avant-garde, for instance, was the victim of the revolution it had ironically worked to bring about: with the ascendancy of the Culture Commissars in the early twenties, avant-garde production all but ceased, although certain individual artists like Lissitsky and Rodchenko worked out ways of accommodation and special coding. The Italian avant-garde dissolved in the course of World War I, in which such leading figures as Boccioni and Sant’Elia were killed. Futurism after the war either moved in the direction of Fascism or dissolved into a polite and meaningless salon painting that no one could fault. As for Zurich Dada, at the end of the enforced exile its members underwent during the war, the movement gave way to a Paris version that soon turned from the cult of anarchy, agonism, and chance to the Surrealist concern with the dream states, automatic writing, and Communist politics.

Again, geographical avant-gardes like the New York School or the so-called San Francisco Renaissance transform themselves as their actual milieu changes. The New York of Frank O’Hara, where poets easily moved in and out of this or that cold water flat and somehow found employment to support their poetry habit, is long gone, and San Francisco is now a major corporate center of the computer and internet industry. From the vantage point of these movements, Language poetry has lasted a rather long time, propped up primarily by the once suspect university that now fosters so many of its readings, performances, and publications. But such patronage has had its price: what we might call the curricular avant-garde has bred a second generation that seems—at least to me—to be spinning its wheels, try as it may to separate itself from its more successful precursors. Influence does not, in any case, go in a straight line: second-generation New York abstract expressionists, for example, were soon eclipsed by artists, whether Pop, Minimalist, Conceptualist or Color Field, who revolted against its very principles. The lesson for students of the avant-garde would seem to be that whatever the “new wave” proves to be, it is not likely to be a continuation of the avant-garde—in this case, of Language poetry—as we know it.

Indeed, such Language issues as the repudiation of the “natural look” no longer have the urgency they once had. As mediated by the internet, no poem can be fully “natural”; on screen, it is always already simulated and simulatable. In the same vein, the debate about reader construction (who owns the text?) becomes irrelevant, the reader having the “privilege” of transforming any given text into something else. Even a forwarded email is no longer the “real thing,” for the forwarder can edit it at will, all the while presenting it as belonging to its original author. The resistance to commodified language thus becomes less interesting than the ability to cite that language and “write through” it or to play it off against other discourses.
AVANT-GARDE TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT: THE CASE OF LANGUAGE POETRY

It would be difficult to overemphasize the difference the new digital technologies have made to all writing—poetic writing included. Language poetry, however agonistic vis-à-vis the mainstream, was, like the other poetries of the time, a page-based phenomenon. Whether the poems in question were long or short, in verse or in prose, they were of course poems to be read and digested in the privacy of one’s own space. True, these poems were and continue to be read publicly, but ironically the poetry reading has itself become a way of perpetuating what Bernstein called the transom theory of communication: the poet in front of the room at the lectern, leafing through his or her recently published volumes and new notebook drafts, reads to those others who are in the audience. Digital discourse is fast making this mode obsolete, for one can now produce one’s own temporal and spatial environment for the reception of the reading in question, even as the “look” of the poetry being read becomes very important on the computer screen.

Seeing, hearing, performing: in the internet age these take on a rather different valence from the poetries of the eighties. The complex semantic charge of much Language poetry, for example, downplayed the concomitant complexities of sound or visual structure, and by the mid-90s, younger “experimental” poets, trained to believe that metrics and traditional genres were old-hat, produced countless free-verse or prose poems, whose visual and aural potential remained largely undeveloped. Meanwhile, as websites like Kenneth Goldsmith’s ubu.com make clear, a new poetics is emerging that traces its genealogy, not, say, to the Objectivists, as was the case with Language poetry, but to Brazilian Concrete Poetry of the ’50s, to the procedural poetics of Oulipo, and to sound poetry from Kurt Schwitters to Henri Chopin to the ethnopoetic performances of Jerome Rothenberg and the soundworks of the Four Horsemen. And further, as Craig Dworkin’s online Ubuweb Anthology of Conceptual Writing suggests, there is now increasing interest in the “non-expressive” writings of such artists as Vito Acconci and Joseph Kosuth, Robert Morris and Adrian Piper—writings that negotiate, in Dworkin’s words, “between the modernist emphasis on [...] the materiality of language itself and a postmodernist understanding of a theoretically based art that is independent of genre, so that a particular poem might have more in common with a particular musical score, or film, or sculpture than with another lyric” [www.ubu.com].

Independence of genre in relation to modernist materiality: Dworkin reminds us that Modernism remains at the very base of so-called “experimental” or “innovative” poetics. Indeed, after decades of Modernist-baiting, every indicator suggests that the Moderns are back with a vengeance, or more accurately that they have never left us. And, in the context of Pound (whose lyric poetry minus the Cantos the Library of America has just brought out in a volume of 1200 pages), or Stein, recently
the subject of Ulla Dydo’s massive genetic study, *The Language Rises* (2003), or the Duchamp of the readymades and boxes I discuss in *Twenty-First Century Modernism*, certain individual Language poets have already emerged as poets who are judged according to their own lights, the larger Language movement itself notwithstanding.

Consider the case of Susan Howe, who is technically a Language poet in that she is included in all the “Language” anthologies, teaches in the Buffalo poetics program directed until recently by that most visible of Language poets Charles Bernstein, and is grouped with Language poets in courses and on reading lists. Like Bernstein and Hejinian, Howe has always abjured the “natural look” and the transom-theory of communication; her referents are always ambiguous and she easily shifts from verse to prose and back. She has never produced the collections of lyrics that mark most poetic careers, and none of her narratives are ever linear, logical, or even sequential. Again, like the other Language poets, Howe’s hybrid forms contain political critique—in her case, critique of New England history and antiquarian zeal in all their patriarchal authoritarianism, latent capitalism, lingering Puritanism.

But—and this is where Howe parts company with most of her peers—her discourse radius is neither that of pop culture nor of everyday life in a mediated America but of history, whether New England history, the history of Ireland in the 19th century, or of Prague during the Thirty Years War. In her poetic imagination, past and present are one, the key to their understanding being lexicography. Webster’s 3rd International Dictionary, Howe has often remarked, is her Bible. Then, too, having been trained as a visual artist, Howe’s romance with history is created by the relation of word to image, sentence to photograph as well as to documentation both verbal and pictorial. And, whereas some Language poets write a loose, free verse, Howe’s is tight and formalized, her short highly structured verse columns resembling chants and spells that modulate at their breaking point into a sometimes documentary, sometimes highly poetic prose.

Howe’s most recent book *The Midnight*, for example, was prompted by the death, in her nineties, of her Irish actress mother Mary Manning, whose life was as poignant as it was colorful. But Howe’s is no usual memoir or elegy; rather, her complex portrait is a collage, built on altered family photographs, fly-leaves of old books, citations from Victorian writers on whom Mary Manning and her brother John were raised—Lewis Carroll, W. B. Yeats, Robert Louis Stevenson—, anecdotes about Mary’s acting days and her Irish critics and directors, citations from Emerson and Pierce, all these juxtaposed to two series of short lyric poems called “Bed Hangings,” which in their turn draw on a “pedestrian gray paperback” Howe discovered by chance in a bookshop in Hartford, called *Bed Hangings: a Treatise on Fabrics and*...
Styles in the Curtaining of Beds, 1650-1850. Why should bed hangings and their cognates—old laces, curtains, bed covers, drapes, weavings—appeal to the poet? Perhaps because, as she tells us, she is “an insomniac who goes to bed in a closet” (43). Bed hangings, in any case, are central to Howe’s own weave, The Midnight being structured as a tissue of resonant narrative and lyric fragments in which words and images transform each others’ meanings.

The book opens with a facsimile of the title page of Robert Louis Stevenson’s great tale of romance and evil, The Master of Ballantrae (1889):

There was a time when bookbinders placed a tissue interleaf between frontispiece and title page in order to prevent illustration and text from rubbing together. Although a sign is understood to be consubstantial with the thing or being it represents, word and picture are essentially rivals. The transitional space between image and scripture is often a zone of contention. Here we must separate. Even printers and binders drift apart. Tissue paper for wrapping or folding can also be used for tracing. Mist-like transience. Listen, quick rustling. If a piece of sentence left unfinished can act as witness to a question proposed by a suspected ending, the other side is what will happen. Stage snow. Pantomime.

Give me a sheet.

And on the verso:

The counterfeit presentment of two papers. After 1914, advances in printing technology rendered an interleaf obsolete. Mischief delights in playing with surfaces. Today each spectral scrap intact in a handed down book has acquired an enchanted aura quite apart from its original utilitarian function. Wonderfully life-like, approaching transparency, not shining: this pale or wanly yellow, tangible intangible murderously gentle exile, mutely begs to be excused. Superstition remains—as spiritual hyphen. Listen, quick rustling. In second character, freed from practical obligation. I’m not asleep just leafing. Miniature scenery. Etiquette.

On your side, with pleasure.

Howe’s is, of course a “counterfeit presentment” because her image can render the title page covered by tissue interleaf only as a facsimile. The “spectral scrap” of tissue is the first of the many covers, linens, cloth tissues, curtains that mask and yet define the “story” of Mary Manning as of Susan Howe herself, as “told” by means of lyric, narrative, pictogram, painting, and especially what we might call, on the model of Duchamp’s assisted readymade, the assisted photograph—a photograph doctored up so as to participate in the metonymic tracery of Howe’s long poem.

Consider page 119 [see fig. 4] where the poet reproduces a facsimile of the first or “A” page of Mary Manning’s address book, the last such she evidently owned, in which she was jotting down phone numbers at the time of her death. The facsimile page is separated by a block of print (Howe’s account of her mother’s comings and goings between Ireland and Cambridge, finally settling in the latter) from a rather muzzy photograph.
Marjorie Perloff

(facing right even as the address-book page faces left) of a young girl, pasted at an angle into its frame, reproduced at the top of the page. Howe’s note for this image reads “Photograph of Mary Manning, circa 1913. Caption reads: ‘Watching an aeroplane / Mary Manning.’” But the caption is not reproduced here.

Watching an aeroplane in 1913? The page from the address book has been cropped and angled so that only two numbers are legible: Aer Lingus (800-223-6537) and Audio-Ears (484-8700). What do these signify? Was Mary Manning Howe planning a trip to Ireland when she died? Did she want to die in her home country? Or is it merely a useful phone number to have when Irish visitors come to Cambridge? Again, if this very old lady wanted to call Audio-Ears, perhaps for a new hearing aid or repair of an old one, what does that signify vis-à-vis thoughts of death and Ireland? Mary Manning’s purpose remains mysterious. But The Midnight itself makes the connections.

For can it be a coincidence that Aer is an anagram for Ears? Or that Ling-us contains the root that gives us linguistic? Then, too, Aer is a synonym for “air” or song—a language air, so to speak—and as such it depends, of course, on “Audio Ears.” Howe’s poetic text thus works by juxtaposition: for example, the facsimile of a scrap of paper that may not even really exist is contrasted to the very much existing facsimile of Emily Dickinson manuscript 169—it bears only the three words “grasped by god” (126)—which is literally inaccessible: a fragment kept with the Dickinson papers in Harvard’s Houghton Library, it is out of bounds in a room closed to readers.

In the intricacy of its collage cuts and juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated facsimiles and fragments, The Midnight can be called a language poem, but its refractions and reflections are probably closer to a Henry James novella than to the work of her fellow Language poets. Which is to say that her poetry is finally sui generis. But, then, such individuation is hardly surprising. As Pound understood when he abruptly turned away from the Imagism he had invented, once an avant-garde movement has caught on, it is time, in Jasper Johns’s words, to do something else. At his inaugural reading at the Kelly Writers’ House of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he had just become a professor, Charles Bernstein concluded with the following poem, which goes like this:

```plaintext
every lake has a house
& every house has a stove
& every stove has a pot
& every pot has a lid
& every lid has a handle
& every handle has a stem
& every stem has an edge
& every edge has a lining
& every lining has a margin
```
AVANT-GARDE TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT: THE CASE OF LANGUAGE POETRY

Mary Manning had crossed the Irish Sea several times, though never the English Channel, and had crossed the Atlantic Ocean both ways twice (third class). Economic survival tactics during a time of war, revolution, counter-revolution, and the traumatic birth of a nation, meant setting out as a poor relation. So, after being an actress, a theatre critic, a magazine editor, the author of two plays and a novel, she arrived in Cambridge, Massachussets in 1934 at the home of her Aunt Muriel where she met my father and became a faculty wife and a mother.

Even into her nineties she kept leaving in order to arrive one place or another as the first step in a never ending process somewhere else.

Fig. 4: © 2003 Susan Howe. From The Midnight, New York, New Directions, 2003, 119; by kind permission of Susan Howe.
"Every lake" was written on Bernstein’s Scandinavian tour in 2001. While visiting the lake country of Norway he was evidently told that “everyone” has a house on a lake. Then, too, he may well have remembered that Wittgenstein, whose propositions “Every lake” calls to mind, had such a house. Such information, in any case, generated the short “simple” propositions, one per line, that follow. At first these propositions are quite reasonable, even logical, what with “& every pot has a lid / & every lid has a handle,” but they become increasingly absurd, rising to the non-sensicality of “every factor has a face.” But never wholly absurd in that lines like “& every slit has a slope” make sense aurally if not semantically, the words related not only by alliteration, but by the sound play that takes us from “slit” to ‘slope” versus the missing word “slippery,” as in “slippery slope.” Indeed, the whole poem is a set of slippery slopes, whose descent leads to all sorts of wrong turnings. But then, with the pun in line 15—“& every thought has a trap / & every trap has a door”—some sort of sense reasserts itself, culminating in the inverted return to the opening, in which, this time, it is not “every lake” that “has a house” but “every house” that “has a lake.” The outcome seems nothing if not plausible.

“Every lake” is, at one level, a playful send-up of nursery-rhyme logic; here nothing quite “follows” from what has come before and the propositions are largely non-sensical. But the lyric has a Wittgensteinian dimension as well. It was Wittgenstein, after all, who taught us that the meaning of even the simplest proposition like “The rose is red” varies according to its use in the language. If, for example, the context for “& every edge has a lining” were the proverb, “Every cloud has a silver lining,” then the “edge” does “have” a lining, for, in the case of clouds, that silver lining is the edge. A given proposition thus demands our fullest attention, but, in our media climate, Bernstein implies, we tend to process such statements just as we process the daily news: a (already not quite right) leads to b and next thing you know, b has led to the assertion of c, which fudges just enough to make a mockery of the whole sequence.
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Bernstein has always played with these notions of “mistake” and mind control; his poetry has always been deeply political. But whereas his most characteristic poetry involves markedly disjunctive syntax, replete with wild puns, citations, comic routines, and conceptual vocabulary, here is a poem whose “simple” structure is that of a perfect circle, its language heavily visual and descriptive, its syntax straightforward, its diction “normal,” and its rhythm that of simple chant with incremental repetition.

Is this a Language poem? The question is moot. For what matters, twenty-five years after the fact, is less the specific avant-garde “tradition” “every lake” comes from than the “individual talent” which is so clearly Bernstein’s own.

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<td>Mathys, Ted</td>
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1. In the *October* 105 special Dada issue, the emphasis is largely on German Dada, and specifically on its politics. As such, the Dada label seems increasingly beside the point. Or, as in the case of Hal Foster’s “Dada Mime,” a reconsideration of performance in Zurich Dada, the case is made for a “dehumanization” that leads inevitably to the dehumanization of Naziism.

2. *Oulipo Compendium* has sections on such offshoots as the Oupeintpo (*Ouvroir de peinture potentielle*), Ouphopo (*Ouvroir de photographie potentielle*), and Oumupo (*Ouvroir de musique potentielle*). See Matthews 74-325.

3. This essay, in heavily revised form, was reprinted as “Diminished Reference and the Model Reader,” in *North of Intention*. 13-29.

4. Indeed, McCaffery’s thesis can be understood as an extreme version of Roman Jakobson’s axiom that in poetry the sign is never equivalent to its referent and the corollary that poetry is language that is somehow extraordinary. See Jakobson 62-94.

5. This essay was first published in *Poetics Journal 4*, “Women and Language” Issue (May 1984).


7. LI 43. We should note that such definitions of reader construction are somewhat simplified versions of poststructuralist theory. For Foucault, the important thing is that the reader can see through a given text and detect its ideological determinations and hence its “true” thrust; for Barthes the emphasis is on imaginative reinvention as in his reading of Balzac’s *Sarrasine* in his *S/Z*. Neither Foucault or Barthes meant that the author wasn’t responsible for the text he had created or that it was authored by a “community” rather than the individual poet.

8. My own *Radical Artifice* elaborates on this argument. But it is only fair to say that the argument has come under fire from Marxist critics themselves. Thus the British critic Rod Mengham has observed that the equation of reference to the commodity fetish is “too neat and too constricting to let the poetry do very much work of its own”:

> It reduces the act of writing to a blind act of sabotage repeated an infinite number of times, so that, although the resulting text seems difficult at first, its probable effect is much simpler than the interlocking series of relations it is trying to replace. The ‘Language’ writers are so fascinated by the conceptual framework it is their task to critique that they find it hard to free their thought from its shadow. (116).

9. I discuss these in *Radical Artifice*, *Poetic License*, and *Twenty-First Century Modernism*.

10. No language poet has thus far won a MacArthur Fellowship. A few—Bernstein, Howe, Michael Palmer—have won Guggenheim and smaller prizes, but at this level the Language poets cannot compete with such of their contemporaries as Ann Lauterbach, Jorie Graham, Carl Phillips, etc.

**NOTES**

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