

# Textual Politics and the Language Poets

(excerpts)

by George Hartley (1989)

"Let us undermine the bourgeoisie." So Ron Silliman ends his contribution to "The Politics of Poetry" symposium in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 9/10 (October 1979). The organizing topic of that symposium was "what qualities writing has or could have that contribute to an understanding or critique of society, seen as a capitalist system." While many respondents pointed out their difficulty with the notion that writing per se has any generalizable qualities, most of the participants agreed that, in one way or another, a particular poetry at a particular time may offer a critique of bourgeois society. Specifically, what has come to be known as Language Poetry is held out to be one of the poetic modes of the present moment (in addition to certain minority, feminist, and gay poetics) which functions as such a critique.

But in what ways can the following excerpt from Charles Bernstein's "Lift Plow Plates" be seen as a critique of capitalist society?

For brief scratches, omits,  
lays away the oars (hours).  
Flagrant immersion besets all  
the best boats. Hands, hearts  
don't slip, solidly  
(sadly) departs.

In what ways is this writing "'decentered', 'community controlled', taken out of the service of the capitalist project," as Bernstein himself puts it in his contribution to "The Politics of Poetry?" This book is a critical analysis of how some so-called Language Poets have answered those questions.

Who are the Language poets? The answer to that question depends on how one defines the label. One could begin, for instance, by listing those poets (most born between 1940 and 1950) who for fifteen years or so have appeared in the following Language anthologies: *Toothpick, Lisbon & the Orcas Islands* (1973); *Alcheringa* (1975); *Open Letter* (1977); *Hills* (1980); *Ironwood* (1982); *Paris Review* (1982); *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984); *Change* (1985); *Writing/Talks* (1985); *boundary 2* (1986); *In the American Tree* (1986); and *"Language" Poetries* (1987). While the periphery of the group remains rather amorphous-Silliman lists almost eighty poets who might have accompanied the forty who are represented in *In the American Tree*--many names frequently recur in anthologies, critical essays, and poetry magazines such as *This*, *Tottel's*, *Roof Hills*, *Miam*, *Qu*, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, *The Difficulties*, *A Hundred Posters*, and more recently (though not as the predominant group) *Sulfur*, *Temblor*, *Sink*, and *Tramen*. Those frequent names are Bruce Andrews, Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Charles Bernstein, David Bromige, Clark Coolidge, Alan Davies, Ray DiPalma, Robert Grenier, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Steve McCaffery, Michael Palmer, **Bob Perelman**, Kit Robinson, Peter Seaton, James Sherry, Ron Silliman, Diane Ward, Barrett Watten, and Hannah Weiner.

Why the name Language? The answer to that question would take us beyond the above listing of names--for what poet in one way or another does not deal with language? What particular use of or attitude towards language connects these poets and excludes others? Before proceeding with that analysis, I need to point out what I am not doing in the pages that follow. I do not attempt to define that which most of

the poets I discuss have denounced-the label Language Poetry itself. As Silliman has argued, at least since his editing of "The Dwelling Place: 9 Poets," what connects these writers (first called "language-centered" in Steve McCaffery's 1976 essay, "The Death of the Subject") is not any particular style or practice but a "community of concern for language as the center of whatever activity poems might be." The way Susan Howe, for instance, enacts this concern with the foregrounding of language does not at all resemble the way Silliman often does. While some of Howe's poems might superficially resemble some of Bruce Andrews's, the tone of each could hardly be more dissimilar (as we shall see).

Nevertheless, one can generalize more safely about the poetic concerns which have led these poets, from the first issue of *This* in 1971 to the present, to establish an elaborate network of small presses and talk series, a network which has possibly allowed for a greater degree of cross-fertilization and of independence from the defining process of academic criticism than perhaps any group since the Black Mountain school. Those concerns, for the most part, grow out of the rejection of the dominant model for poetic production and reception today-the so-called voice poem. According to many Language poets, the voice poem depends on a model of communication that needs to be challenged: the notion that the poet (a self-present subject) transmits a particular message ("experience," "emotion") to a reader (another self-present subject) through a language which is neutral, transparent, "natural." Carla Harryman's "For She" can be read as an exploration of narrative assumptions:

The back of the head resting on the pillow was not wasted. We couldn't hear each other speak. The puddle in the bathroom, the sassy one. There were many years between us. I stared the stranger into facing up to Maxine, who had come out of the forest bad from wet nights. I came from an odd bed, a vermilion riot attracted to loud dogs. Nonetheless, I could pay my rent and provide for him. On this occasion she apologized. (from: *Under the Bridge*)

Harryman's poem goes through the motions of narrative, but one would be hard put to summarize what story has been told. "For She" challenges the "naturalness" of the narrative mode by foregrounding the devices which organize otherwise disparate elements into a seemingly seamless whole. This challenge to the "natural" look of the voice poem is one major concern of most Language poets.

Bernstein writes that "there is no natural writing style" (*The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, p. 43; hereafter cited as LB). What looks natural about a given poem is actually the result of a number of procedures and assumptions about writing that the author may be more or less conscious of when composing. Those procedures and assumptions are in fact social constructions which have become conventions. Thus most Language poets attempt to remind us of the socially contrived basis of any writing. They do not do so, however, by abandoning modes of writing, for such an action is impossible. "Modes cannot be escaped," Bernstein continues, "but they can be taken for granted. They can also be meant" (p. 44). It is the mode-that-is-meant, so to speak, the exploration of the possibilities for meaning-production, which lies behind most Language poetry.

The last point cannot be stressed enough. For, although these poets rigorously deconstruct the notions behind much contemporary poetry in this country, that deconstruction is often followed by an attempt to develop a constructive writing practice. As poet Steve Benson has put it, these writers "markedly propose conscious value to what could other-wise be taken as impingements in a literature of autonomous display" (*In the American Tree*, p. 487). Such writing is seen to be constructive in its demolition of the conventional relationship between the active (dictatorial) writer and the passive (victimized) reader. Language writing is often posed as an attempt to draw the reader into the production process by leaving the connections between various elements open, thus allowing the reader to produce the connections between those elements. In this way, presumably, the reader recognizes his or her part in the social process of production. But just as important, the ambiguity of the structure of many of these

poems should remind the reader that any connections drawn are arbitrary. It is the framing process itself, and by extension the process of ideological framing, which is no longer taken for granted. I refer to this laying bare of the framing process as "syntaxis." Through this dissection, the exploration of the possibilities of syntactical construction serves as an ideology critique by drawing our attention to the socially-determined frames by which we constitute our world.

I trace . . . the recent history of formal concerns in the works of Emily [Dickinson](#), Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams ... Louis Zukofsky... and John Ashbery.

I stress that whatever political value might be attached to a given poetic mode must take into account the historical context in which each manifestation of that mode appears. While Susan Howe, for example, may model her own work on certain aspects of Dickinson's, one must always keep in mind the century that separates the two. No mode, in other words, does its work all by itself in some transhistorical way (as Julia Kristeva's notion of revolution in poetic language might lead one to conclude).

I wish to stress at this point that there is no single argument, political or otherwise, that applies to everyone labeled a "Language poet." I make no claim, therefore, that the particular political positions to be analyzed in the following pages apply to all or even most of the Language poets. As should become clear, even the handful of poets whom I discuss here vary widely in their view of the connections between poetry and politics. To the extent that a particular point may seem applicable to all whom I discuss here, then some of these claims are more generalizable than others, and it has been my goal to make clear which claims can and cannot be extended beyond a particular poet. Because of this difficulty, I have tended to focus on those Language poets who have made specifically Marxist claims for their work. Those poets are the San Francisco Bay area poets Ron Silliman (author of *Ketjak* [1978], *Tjanting* [1981], *ABC* [1983], *The Age of Huts* [1986]; and editor of *In the American Tree* [1986]), Bob Perelman (*7 Works* [1978], *Primer* [1981], *The First World* [1986]; editor of *Hills* magazine and *Writing/Talks* [1985]), and Barrett Watten (*Opera-Works* [1975], *1-10* [1980], *Total Syntax* [1985], *Progress* [1986]; co-editor [with Robert Grenier of *This* magazine, co-editor [with Lyn Hejinian] of *Poetics Journal*), the New York poets Charles Bernstein (*Poetic Justice* [1979], *Controlling Interests* [1980], *Islets/Irritations* [1983], *Content's Dream* [1986], *The Sophist* [1987]; co-editor [with Bruce Andrews] of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* [1984]) and Bruce Andrews (*Praxis* [1978], *Sonnets-memento mori* [1980], *Wobbling* [1980], *Love Songs* [1982], *Give Em Enough Rope* [1985]; co-editor [with Charles Bernstein] of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* [1984]), and Toronto poet Steve McCaffery (whose work has been primarily performance and sound poetry; editor of *The Politics of the Referent* [Open Letter 1977]).

For Susan Howe, the opening up of syntax is the opening up of thought, the denial of imposed intellectual categories. "Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein," Howe writes, ". . . conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of the sentence?" (*My Emily Dickinson*, 11). What is needed is a new grammar:

Fantasticality  
nimble phantasma capering on a page

with antic  
gesture.

Stein's work, as Howe suggests, is a second major precursor of Language poetry. The December 1978

issue of  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  (the journal, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, which served as a forum for poets involved with so-called language-writing) began with a special feature on readings of Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914). A key passage from these readings is the first poem in Stein's work:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a  
single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing.  
All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The  
difference is spreading.

Before attempting to analyze the significance of this poem for many of the Language poets, I want to quote extensively from certain readings by the poets themselves. Michael Davidson writes:

[Most critics] operate on either side of a referential paradigm; one wants her to mean nothing and the other wants her to mean intrinsically. But what makes *Tender Buttons* so vital is not the strategies by which meaning is avoided or encoded but how each piece points at possibilities for meaning. Unlike the Symbolist who creates beautiful detachable artifacts, Stein's prose is firmly tied to the world –but it is a world constantly under construction, a world in which the equation of word and thing can no longer be taken for granted. "The difference is spreading" not only foreshadows deconstructive thought; it recognizes that between one term (a carafe) and a possible substitute (a blind glass) exists a barrier, not an equal sign, and it is this difference which supports all signification.

From [Jackson Mac Low](#) (a fellow traveler and precursor of much in Language poetry):

But can I specify anything beyond sounds? To use a phrase I first heard from Spencer Holst, it gives "the sensation of meaning," but can I connect the meanings of the words as readily as I find their sounds connected?

Beyond the obvious fact that the carafe is made of glass I can see only certain connections of meanings.

From Robert Grenier:

It's not "snapshots" (moves; don't copy nature), & it's not "the pathetic fallacy" (though it includes much of the artist's process). And it ain't "abstract."

While each of these poets approaches the poem differently, a general consensus does seem to emerge. Stein's importance for them appears to lie in the following qualities of her work:

1. Although her work appears to be meaningless, it does have meaning; in fact, it seems to be an exploration of the very conditions for meaning.
2. Meaning is not forwarded as something existing out in the world but as an interaction between subject and object.

3. Her work appears to operate under the assumptions of the Saussurean conception of meaning as a function of a system of difference.
4. She does not write in order to enclose (define, delimit, decipher) the world but to move within it; in other words, she does not function according to the static determinism of the noun but through the process of relationship.
5. Her foregrounding of the material side of language (sound, rhythm, syntax) is a formal analogy of the process of perception—the "movement 'spreading' from transparency . . . to the implied darkness & opacity of blindness."

Language poet Lyn Hejinian argues in *Temblor 3* (1986) that Stein's language is not only meaningful but is in fact a form of realism superior to what we customarily call realism, a mimesis not of the external object but of the perceptual process, a realism not of subject matter but of artistic means. Stein offers a later generation of poets a way of making sense of the way we make sense.

As Robert Grenier goes on to point out in his *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* essay, however, Stein's other work may not offer itself so readily as a model for the Language school:

I think it's at best a "creative misreading" of Stein to take her work as a whole as a primary instance of "language-oriented writing." [Her other works], if anything, a prototype of confessional poetry) all are intent to make new ways to say something—show her thinking language not as object-in-itself, but as composition functioning in the composition of the world.

In other words, while there may be formal similarities between *Tender Buttons* and some Language poetry, Grenier claims that there is also a significant difference in their aims for poetry.

The attraction of *Tender Buttons* for poet Ron Silliman lies in Stein's use of **the sentence rather than the line as the unit of composition**. The sentences in Stein's portraits of homely objects are juxtaposed so as to create friction, like the units of perspective are in a Cubist painting. In standard prose, sentences are arranged within the paragraph in syllogistic order, one premise contributing logically to the preceding and succeeding ones. But Stein's sentence arrangement challenges our syllogistic expectations. "The syllogistic move above the sentence level to an exterior reference is possible," Silliman writes, "but the nature of the book reverses the direction of this movement. Rather than making the shift in an automatic and gestalt sort of way, the reader is forced to deduce it from the partial views and associations posited in each sentence" (*The New Sentence*, p. 84).

*Tender Buttons* thus presages the "New Sentence," Silliman's term for contemporary prose poetry of the type that he and his associates often write. Silliman characterizes the "New Sentence" as follows:

- 1) The paragraph (rather than the stanza) organizes the sentences;
- 2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
- 3) Sentence length (rather than the line) is a unit of measure;
- 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
- 5) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited; (b) controlled;
- 6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
- 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, the sentence level or below.

(*The New Sentence*, p. 91)

Here is an example from his Tjanting (1981):

Forcing oneself to it. It wld've been new with a blue pen. Giving oneself to it. Of about to within which what without. Hands writing. Out of the rockpile grew poppies. Sip mineral water, smoke cigar. Again I began. One sees seams. These clouds break up in the late afternoon, blue patches. I began again but it was not beginning. Somber hue of gray day sky filled the yellow room. Ridges & bridges. Each sentence accounts for all the rest. I was I discovered on the road. Not this. Counting my fingers to get different answers. Four wooden chairs in the yard, rain-warped, wind-blown. Cat on the bear rug naps. Grease sizzles & spits on the stove top. In paradise plane wrecks are distributed evenly throughout the desert. All the same, no difference, no blame. Moon's rise at noon. In the air hung odor of ammonia. I felt disease. Not not not-this. Reddest red contains trace of blue. That to the this then. What words tear out. All elements fit into nine crystal structures. Waiting for the cheese to go blue. Thirty-two. Measure meters pause. Applause. (p. 12)

What makes this an example of the "New Sentence" is not the nature of the sentences themselves---even though some of them do stand out because of their nonstandard diction or syntax---but the arrangement of the individual sentences within the paragraph and within the poem as a whole (which is 213 pages long). Despite its inverted syntax, "Out of the rock pile grew poppies," for instance, is a fairly ordinary referential sentence. Coming right after "Hands writing," however, this sentence seems to demand to be encapsulated between quotation marks, to be presented as an example of what hands write rather than as a direct statement to be taken at face value. "Rockpile" is then metonymically recalled in the following sentence in "mineral water," while the self-conscious attention to usually rote actions, sipping and smoking, refers back to "Hands writing." Not much later our rockpile sentence becomes recontextualized even further by "One sees seams," which refers in part to the reader's perception of Silliman's writing process itself--the deliberate focusing of attention on the contextualizing process of writing--the rockpile now becoming a trope for the pile of sentences which is Tjanting, out of which, despite superficial appearances, meaning coheres and accretes. The gaps between sentences (the locus of tension or "torque"), the visible seams, here take the place of the line break and draw our attention to the materiality of the words as words, not simply as transparent signifiers.

Such writing is reminiscent not only of Stein but of William Carlos Williams as well, especially his *Kora in Hell* (1918). Influenced as Stein was by the European avant-garde painters, particularly the Cubists and the Dadaists, Williams writes words and sentences that continually drift between materiality and transparency. The following paragraph from *Kora in Hell* illustrates the "torquing" of sentences that Silliman values:

How smoothly the car runs. This must be the road. Queer how a road juts in. How the dark catches among those trees! How the light clings to the canal! Yes, there's one table taken, we'll not be alone. This place has possibilities. Will you bring her here? Perhaps---and when we meet on the stair, shall we speak, say it is some acquaintance---or pass silent? Well, a jest's a jest but how poor this tea is. Think of a life in this place, here in these hills by these truck farms. Whose life? Why there, back of you. if a woman laughs a little loudly one always thinks that way of her. But how she bedizens the country-side. Quite an old world glamour. if it were not for-but one cannot have everything. What poor tea it was. How cold it's grown. Cheering, a light is that way among the trees. That heavy laugh! How it will rattle these branches in six weeks' time. (*Imaginations*, 37)

Another major New American influence on certain Language poets is the New York School, especially

John Ashbery. The most influential Ashbery text is *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), which critic Harold Bloom has called "the outrageously disjunctive volume," flawed because Ashbery "attempted too massive a swerve away from the ruminative continuities of Stevens and Whitman" ("John Ashbery," 111). But it is precisely the book's swerve from rumination and continuity that makes it such an important model for contemporary poets. These qualities are evident in the poem "White Roses":



The worst side of it all---  
 The white sunlight on the polished floor---  
 Pressed into service,  
 And then the window closed  
 And the night ends and begins again.  
 Her face goes green, her eyes are green,  
 In the dark comer playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever." I try to  
     describe for you,  
 But you will not listen, you are like the swan.

Of the Language poets, Andrews has written perhaps the most extensive critical response to *The Tennis Court Oath*. In "Misrepresentation" (*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 12 [1980]) Andrews claims that Ashbery's book "poses for us a radical questioning of established forms, yet at the same time, and so appropriately in its own form, it explores the implications of that questioning---not as an idea, but as an experience and a reading." The work demands, in other words, "Behavioral reading, rather than hermeneutic ones." Through his "convulsed" syntax, his "jagged kaleidoscope" of images, and his interruptions of tone, Ashbery questions language's ability to represent as well as our desire to represent, our need to expose the world and ourselves in the light of day. "I try to/ describe for you," Ashbery writes, but he recognizes that "no stars are there/ No stripes,/ But a blind man's cane poking..... Once one has recognized the inherent opacity of the word, the social contract behind its supposed transparency, "it makes sense to be skeptical, to embody in composition the doubt that transparency is more than a devious & second-best fraud, fraught with an illusory naturalism, a making into nature what is really our production." The answer is not, however, to give up on language and meaning-why write if such were the case?-but to put forward a writing of self-conscious production that recognizes the arbitrary but necessary choices behind what we determine as "truth."

Charles Bernstein is one contemporary poet to benefit from Ashbery's "swerve" from Stevens and Whitman (if it is a swerve---one could possibly argue for a disruption of ruminative continuity even in parts of their work.) Andrews's discussion of *The Tennis Court Oath*, for instance, applies equally well to many poems in Bernstein's *Controlling Interests* (1980). From "Matters of Policy":

On a broad plain in a universe of  
 anterooms, making signals in the dark,  
 you fall down on your waistband &, carrying your  
 own plate, a last serving, set out for  
 another glimpse of a gaze. In a room  
 full of kids splintering like gas jets against  
 shadows of tropical taxis---he really had, I  
 should be sorry, I think this is the ("I  
 know I have complained" "I am quite well"  
 "quit nudging")---croissants  
 outshine absinthe as "la plus, plus sans  
 egal" though what I most care  
 about is another sip of my Pepsi-Cola. Miners  
 tell me about the day, like a pack of  
 cards, her girlfriend split for Toronto....  
 (p. 1)

The disjunct syntax, the incomplete statements, and the radical shifts of imagery all recall Ashbery's early work. But what does not occur in "Matters of Policy" is the tortured meditation on perception and representation. Such questioning has been digested during the fifteen or so years intervening between "White Roses" and Bernstein's poem. The essential insight of Ashbery's work---the social production of meaning---now becomes the dominant focus, enlisted in an examination of the politics of the use of language. Irony is posed in Bernstein's work not just as a questioning of language but as a guard against ideological contamination.

In "Misrepresentation," Andrews sees Ashbery's work as the germ for "an Ideologiekritik, and a critique of clarity and transparency and language; and hierarchy arising historically at the same time as instrumental literacy (Levi-Strauss) or the incest taboo." The notion of poetry as ideology critique, as a specific mode of ideological struggle, associates much Language poetry with the various avant-garde manifestations which occurred earlier in this century (such as early the modernism of Williams).

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