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RADICAL FORMALISM / FORMAL RADICALISM

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Doxa

Here is a list of commonly held opinions.

Poetry and politics have little in common. Poetry is seen as concerned with the expression of personal feelings—much less thoughts. This is because we conflate the poetic and the lyric, because our view of poetry is still essentially post-Romantic. Writing and reading poetry are seen as solitary activities. Politics, on the contrary, as the art or science of government, concern the whole society, community, law and institutions. When poets express political positions, they are seen as mere mouthpieces for positions already expounded elsewhere; or, worse still, sentimentalizing pleas for usually lost causes such as Sacco and Vanzetti or Vietnam.

Poetry does not think. How could it anyway, hampered as it is by formal constraints which prevent thought from unwinding itself freely. Ask any student: he or she will tell you the poet must tamper with the truth to fit the patterns. Form is deemed a straightjacket. Form is suspect, as the derogatory derivative term formalism makes quite clear. It focuses on the surface rather than depth, on device (techniques, craft, tricks) rather than ideas. The scandal of form is that it subjects the free-flowing *logos* to a numerical, arbitrary pattern.

Poetry does not tell the truth. This is a direct consequence of its form, never so aptly put as by the XIIth century Pseudo-Turpin: “nul conte rimé n’est vrai”. Unlike science and philosophy, poetry cannot pretend to the status of discourse because it is tainted by the irrational (inspiration, vision, the poet as shaman), because it revels in ambiguity instead of furthering science’s utopia of a perfectly univocal language: no loss, no surplus, increased efficiency. “Plato banished us in order to begin the draining of the word (as one would a swamp over which to build tract housing).” (Silliman and Bernstein in Andrews 1980, 125)

“Poetry makes nothing happen”. This is how Auden famously encapsulated poetry’s lack of efficacy. Poetry is a *poesis* (production) not a *praxis* (practice). It aims at objects, not effects, at durability not performance. Its success is to be measured in terms of aesthetic value not political and social efficacy. The art object is autonomous, not engaged in the world.

Corpus

I want to focus on poets who go against the grain of these well-established assumptions, poets who take the risk of being rejected as “the sort of person who could confuse the Fibonacci number system with class struggle” (Silliman 1994), poets who incur the condemnation of being illegible, highbrow and formalist. Two sets of American poets share these characteristics: the “Objectivists” and the language poets. A loose group of American poets who began writing in the 1930s, the “Objectivists” can be said to have salvaged and re-

politicized Modernist forms and techniques from the conservative or even fascist bias imposed upon them by such High-Modernist forebears as Eliot and Pound¹.

The language poets² emerged simultaneously in the Bay Area and on the East Coast in the 1970s as both a reaction to and an outgrowth of the “New American Poetry”. Poets and critics such as Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten claimed Gertrude Stein, the “Objectivists”, the Russian Formalist and French poststructuralists as influences. In his history of the movement, Perelman recounts that

there was a loose set of goals, procedures, habits, and verbal textures: breaking the automatism of the poetic “I” and its naturalized voice; foregrounding textuality and formal devices; using or alluding to Marxist or poststructuralist theory in order to open the present to critique and change. [...] But linkages between poetry and politics were always the source of dispute. For some, language writing was too programmatically political to be poetry; for a number of New American poets and their supporters, it was too poststructuralist to be political. (Perelman 13)

Interestingly, similar reasons made the “Objectivists” unacceptable to all sides in the 1930s. Their Marxist commitment was frowned upon by their High Modernist forebears while their engagement with form made them suspicious to orthodox communists.

Thesis

By *radical formalism* I mean an engagement with forms that is both extreme (in the experimental tradition) and politically committed to radical politics (progressive, leftist, Marxist). This tradition challenges the pejorative sense of formalism as the claim for the poem’s autonomy, its isolation from social realities and historic context in the tradition of art for art’s sake. Hence its *formal radicalism*; a political radicalism enacted, acted out *in* the form, in the formal aspects of writing; which posits that it is by form (rather than content) that poetry can be political, critical, efficient. This formal radicalism might go so far as to argue that radicalism expressed in content is inadequate—“tweedledum & tweedledee may say opposite things but this becomes a technicality within the context of their identical form” (Bernstein in Bernstein 1990, 237)—or even counterproductive in its uncritical “reproduction of the status quo”:

I GET IMPATIENT

Conventionally, radical dissent & “politics” in writing would be measured in terms of communication & concrete effects on an audience. Which means either a direct effort at empowering or mobilizing—aimed at existing identities—or at the representation of outside conditions, usually in an issue-oriented way. So-called “progressive lit”. The usual assumptions about unmediated communication, giving “voice” to “individual” “experience”, the transparency of the medium (language), the instrumentalizing of language, pluralism, etc. bedevil this project. But more basically:

¹ As I argue in « Politiques poétiques “objectivistes. Formes politiques et engagement poétique chez trois poètes « Objectivistes ». » (Lang, 2006). See also Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations, Modern Poetry and the Material Word*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

² Or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets as it is sometimes spelled, in reference to Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein’s journal entitled *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*.

such conventionally progressive literature fails to self-examine writing & its medium, language. Yet in an era where the reproduction of the social status quo is more & more dependent upon ideology & language (language in ideology & ideology in language), that means that it can't really make claims to comprehend and/or challenge the nature of the social whole; it can't be political in that crucial way. (Bruce Andrews in Bernstein 1990, 23)

Formal radicalism, then, is a political radicalism acted out *in* the form, but not any form. Not bureaucratic formalities, the filling out of dead forms, but experimentation (as a form of practice or *praxis*) working toward the invention, the renewal and the critical attention to form. Ultimately I want to claim, with Jerome Rothenberg, that there exists “an honorable formalist tradition that is in no sense a *mere* formalism”, an “inherently political, problematically tradition—of a language-centered & formally experimental poetry aimed at social, political, & personal transformation” (Bernstein 1990, 4), poets who are formalists in their focus on form, but anti-formalists in their insistence on context and community.

POLITICAL PATTERNS?

Before looking specifically at the Language poets' political and poetic agenda I wish to explore some of the ways form can have meaning, in this case, political meaning. Do certain forms carry an intrinsic political bias *per se*? Is there such a thing as political patterns? Is there a party line? A complete exploration of the politics of prosody is here impossible and I will limit myself to a cursory examination of the politics of free verse.

The analogy between social and prosodic order goes back to Plato and, conversely, the main and possibly only—a catachresis?—metaphor used to address changes of prosodic order is political. The most ancient idea about meter and meaning in the Western tradition is the propriety theory. It holds that certain meters have inherent meaningful qualities suitable, or unsuitable, to particular kinds of thematic material. Eighteenth-century prosodists considered meter to have deep moral implications. Regular meter possessed the power to control the mind and regulate the passions. Iambic pentameter is reputed to even out intonation along the length of the line, force slow, formal, controlled pronunciation, and encourage “syntagmatic” thinking because it allows syntax to cross line breaks. All of this would contribute to the formation and maintenance of the bourgeois personality and aids in political repression.

Conversely, departure from prosodic norm has been expressed in terms of political liberty. Strict form and all devices are suspect in our post romantic era. In the mechanic / organic paradigm revived by the Romantics, existing forms are felt as imposed from outside rather than budding from inside. They are resented as an imposition of the past on the present, and in the United States, as an imposition of Europe³. Free verse completed the American independence in poetry. Later, William Carlos Williams declared his hatred of the sonnet, arguing that putting America into a sonnet was like putting a crab into a box: you had to cut

³ In his famous 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman linked the liberation of the verse line “to a still potent (& often dangerous) American idea of revolution (“democratic & heretical” he called it)”. (Rothenberg in Bernstein 1990, 2)

all its legs off and were left without a crab. Free verse began and continued as a battle cry and was experienced as a revolution against inherited, old regime, imposed forms of the past, against the tyranny of arbitrary form.

Such an identification of prosody and politics irritates some critics. Donald Hall, for instance, thinks that “we need to dismiss the analogy before we can be serious.” Writing in the *Ohio Review* special number on free verse, Hall explains:

I wish we had called free verse something else, because the form has nothing to do with liberty. It seems clear that for many American poets the idea of freedom is confused into the definition of free verse, or the activity we undertake when we write it. . . . Well, Keats’s iambic pentameter —Wordsworth’s, Shakespeare’s, Frost’s, Wallace Stevens’s — was not a slavemaster or a tyrant or an imperialist-Fascist. Meter is neither hierarchical nor elitist in itself, and the political analogy corrupts thought. (Hall in Frank and Sayre xviii)

Similarly Robert Von Hallberg regrets that “discussions of poetic form have thereby been *burdened* by political polemics.” (Brogan, “Politics and Poetry” entry, italics mine) What both Hall and Von Hallberg fail to realize is that the very confusion which they bemoan in fact helps explain the historical importance of free verse, the very grounds of its attraction to several successive generations of American poets.

Malevich once said, “Cubism and futurism were the revolutionary forms of art foreshadowing the revolution in political and economic life of 1917”, suggesting that the esthetic ideals of modernism could be fully realized under a social system that was a kind of political analogue to these ideals. However, by the 1930s, the illusion that revolutionary politics and advanced art were moving in the same direction had evaporated as the High Modernists who broke the force of metrical conventions (Marinetti, Eliot, Pound) were not exactly champions of political liberty, establishing once and for all that prosodic and political polarities do not necessarily correspond. One could champion prosodic freedom, bring about the revolution of free verse and support Mussolini.

What is more, for all its call to freedom and revolution, free verse is just another form, another convention, which has produced poems as trite as metered verse. It is “a highly formalized device for conveniently depicting the disorder”, “a convention announcing unconventionality” (Frank and Sayre xvi). Fundamentally—and despite repeated organicist attempts to ground the line in the body by considering the line as a unit coupled to breath, heart beat or dance step—the free verse line is as arbitrary as any metered line.

This arbitrariness is its very asset to poets who seek to expose the ideology of transparency. In an interesting hypothesis, Ron Silliman presents the line as the only unit of writing that escapes the realm of logic:

The line is the sole unit of punctuation whose use historically has not been determined by its potential for submitting chains of words to the hierarchic (literally hypotactic) orders of logic which, descended from the classical grammars of Greek and Latin, have become our normative contemporary model for “clarity” in writing, both in its expository and depictive modes. The line thus has been set off as the

mark of artifice itself, that index of the arbitrary which acknowledges the social contract as the origin of convention in language—and that language is nothing if not convention. (“Terms of Enjambment” in Frank and Sayre 183-4)

Since political meaning is not inherent, essential to form, how is the political meaning of forms constructed? That is the question I pursue elsewhere with a study of the “Objectivists”. Closely examining how Louis Zukofsky’s “A”-9 reclaimed the form of the *canzone* from Pound’s imposition of fascist connotations in the *Cantos*, I argue that forms have political connotations but that these are contextual, historically determined and thus open to change.

EXPOSING THE LANGUAGE OF IDEOLOGY: THE MODERNIST POET AS LANGUAGE DOCTOR

Vision and revision: the twin functions of the poet are those of seer and maker. Depending on individuals, periods or societies, the focus has been more on the one or on the other. Historically, the poet often also held a social function: bard, troubadour, seer of the future, recorder of the past... But in (post-)industrial societies where poets are increasingly marginalized and alienated, the social function is not given but must be claimed and fought for. The modernist poets appointed themselves language doctors, taking up the “curious responsibility of purifying and/or invigorating language for the public good, not [...] as a conservative matter of prescriptive style & grammar, but as a radical rethinking & reinvention of expression & meaning.” (Bernstein 1990, 3) This new social function may be traced back to the *fin de siècle*, to Mallarmé’s “donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu”, to the crisis of representation evidencing a widening gap between things and names, and to the retreat of transcendence. Initially a medical term, a crisis suggests a diagnosis and a cure, appropriate prescriptions and remedies.

Pound and Brecht both quote Confucius to demonstrate the importance of the purity of language for politics.

If the words are not right, what is said is not what is meant. If what is said is not meant, work cannot flourish. If work does not flourish, then customs and arts degenerate. If customs and arts degenerate, then justice is not just. If justice is not just, the people do not know what to do. Hence the importance that words be right. (Bernstein 1990, 46)

William Carlos Williams, a doctor himself, praised Marianne Moore for “wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts.” (Williams 128) And in his 1950 letter to Robert Creeley, he wrote: “Bad art is then that which does not serve in the continual service of cleansing the language of all fixations upon dead, stinking dead, usages of the past. Sanitation and hygiene or sanitation that we may have hygienic writing.”(Rothenberg in Bernstein 1990, 3)

The corrosive remedies of the modernist avant-garde may have succeeded in the domain of aesthetics, but they were tragically inefficient on a political level, as Rosmarie Waldrop painfully reminds us.

The two decades before Hitler came to power were a period of incredible literary flowering, upheaval, exploration in Germany. All the Dadaists and expressionists had been questioning, challenging, exploring, changing the language, limbering up its joints. So the German language should have been in very good condition, yet the Nazis had no trouble putting it to work for their purposes, perverting it to where what was said was light years from what was meant. So, while language thinks for us, there is no guarantee that it will be in a direction we like. (Bernstein 1990, 47)

Whether the failure of the Modernists' "acid cleansing" is to be primarily ascribed to the fact they were mostly concerned with the lexical—the quest for *le mot juste*—or not, a whole new generation of experimental American poets born around WWII turned their attention to syntax, investigating language as "the material form rationality takes" (Michael Davidson in Brogan, "Language poets" entry).

THE LANGUAGE POETS' INVESTIGATION OF "THE MATERIAL FORM RATIONALITY TAKES"

The social dimension of language

WWII proved that the modernists' investigation of the *aesthetic* dimension of language was insufficient and, along with Vietnam, convinced formal radicals such as the Language poets of the need to investigate the *social* dimension of language; "in order not to speak the same language as Auschwitz" (Hejinian 325). Much of the post WWII formal experimentation can be read in that light: "Poetry after the war has its psychic imperatives: to dismantle the grammar of control and the syntax of command. This is one way to understand the political content of its form." This is a quote from Charles Bernstein's "The Second War and Postmodern Memory", in which he posits that WWII, with its atrocities that defy the possibility of representation, has been *registered* in the writings of a generation of American poets born during WWII; not *represented* in its contents, but *registered formally*. By devices such as:

particularization, process, detail [...], an extreme questioning of "public" forms, a tireless tearing down or tearing away at authoritative / authoritarian language structures [...] an explosion of self-reflectiveness and a refusal of the systematic combined with a pervasive engagement with dislocation up to the point of personal terror: An insistence on the "human" scale of poetry—on the "human crisis"—in a culture going bonkers with mass markets, high technology, and faith in science as savior. [...] a radical rejection of conventional American values of conformism, fitting in, getting along / going along [...] Uncompromising integrity". (Bernstein 1991)

Language poets share the belief that poetry can interrogate how language constitutes, rather than simply reflects, social meaning and values, and that poetry is the most available and best-prepared medium for undertaking the urgently required analysis and critique. They have a keen awareness that words and language are social *constructs*, that, in Sapir's words, "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" (Silliman 1987, 7) and that poetry has the mean to *deconstruct* these constructs, to lay them bare.

After all, the common ground of politics and poetry is language. Linguistics and structuralism, beginning with Saussure, have challenged the pretense that language is “natural” and established the social dimension of language.

Words work not because they are natural emissions by things but because people agree on what they mean. Anything made of words—including a literary work—is socially constructed and socially constructing. Aesthetic discovery is also social discovery. There is, as a result, efficacy in writing. [...] In experimental poetry, aesthetic discovery is congruent with social discovery. New ways of thinking (new relationships among the components of thought) make new ways of being possible. (Hejinian 170, 322)

Barbarian poetics

Lyn Hejinian goes on to argue that in order not to speak the same language as Auschwitz, there is a need for barbarian poetics:

Theodor Adorno’s often cited pronouncement that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism” has to [...] be interpreted [...] not as a condemnation of the attempt “after Auschwitz” to write poetry but, on the contrary, as a challenge and behest to do so. The word “barbarism,” as it comes to us from the Greek *barbaros*, means “foreign”—that is, “not speaking the same language” (*barbaros* being an onomatopoeic imitation of babbling)—and such is precisely the task of poetry: *not to speak the same language as Auschwitz*. Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities. As a result, the poet must assume a barbarian position, taking a creative, analytic, and often oppositional stance, occupying (and being occupied by) foreignness—by the barbarism of strangeness. [...] Poetry at this time, I believe, has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness, and in a complex sense, best captured in another Greek word, *xenos*. (325-6)

One example of the investigation and extension of borders and the encounter of foreignness lies in translation. Emmanuel Hocquard’s vision of translation accounts for the continuous interest that this activity holds for poets, as a means of creating new territory, uncharted areas of language. Rather than conceiving the border between languages as an air-tight, hair-fine boundary, he claims that translation opens up a margin or periphery (“une lisière”), a new zone that is neither on this side nor on that, an unmapped *terra incognita* he calls a “tache blanche”, a blank spot. Translation produces new ground because: “no French poet could ever write this” (Hocquard).

The following paragraphs attempt a brief overview of the Language Poet’s diagnoses and remedies.

Foregrounding the opacity of the medium

One of the tasks taken on by Language poets has been to expose the outright lies of politics and to uncover deceptive metaphors; to reveal expressions such as “clean a pocket of resistance” or “surgical strikes” as atrocious euphemisms. More broadly, they reject the pretense that language is “natural” or transparent, and foreground the opacity of the medium. They resist “communication” which “resembles an exchange of prepackaged commodities” with its “assumptions of reference, representation, transparency, clarity, description, reproduction, positivism; refuse to consider words are mere windows” (Andrews in Andrews

1984, 133); and make language once again visible as a medium, by focusing attention on the material of language itself. “Poetry should provide impediments” (Hejninian). As a result, language writing has often been rejected as illegible by readers, but also by academics. Language poets resist and challenge the tyranny of the whole, expose our habitual urge toward assembling, escaping the materiality of language to bask in sheer plot, the dream of an art without medium. In “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World”, Ron Silliman propounds a Marxist-based indictment of *plot*, as “a process that would lie outside of syntax”, outside the materiality of language, and condemns this “dream of an art with no medium, of a signified with no signifiers, [as] inscribed entirely within the commodity fetish” (Silliman 1987, 14). In other words they refuse comfort poetry and “resist pressures to regress, deny, escape, transcend” (Retallack 27).

The ethical dimension of difficulty

Unlike their 1930s forebears who were excruciatingly split between their allegiance to a demanding Modernist aesthetic and the Party line’s injunction to gratify the masses, this new generation of Marxist poets is unashamed: “While diet and exercise have become a national obsessions the idea of exercising the mind is treated with increasing contempt.” (Bernstein 1999, 15) Bernstein also overturns the traditional question of efficacy by refusing efficacy as a value imposed by an efficacy-oriented society: “The political power of poetry is not measured in numbers, it instructs us to count differently.” (Bernstein 1990, 242) Rejecting the accusation of obscurity they assert an ethical dimension of difficulty. They challenge the “tyranny of the normal” (Leslie Fiedler in Bernstein 1999, 15) by defamiliarizing strategies, resist the endless repetitions of the already known by challenging the reader’s expectations, and propose instead a poetry of encounter, surprise, openness. “What I like in poems is encountering the unexpected” writes Bernstein.

Even before being accused of being illegible, the Language poets started exploring the reading pact between writer and reader.

The primary ideological message of poetry lies not in its explicit content, political though that may be, but in the *attitude toward reception* it demands of the reader. It is this “attitude toward information,” which is carried forward by the recipient. It is this attitude which forms the basis for a response to other information, not necessarily literary, in the text. And, beyond the poem, in the world. (Silliman 1987, 31)

Silliman’s “Sunset Debris” is a thirty-page text made up entirely of questions. “Every sentence is supposed to remind the reader of her or his inability to respond”. Because “the process of consuming information is an act of submission” (Silliman in Perloff 202), the Language poets seek to jolt the reader, to make him active, to make him a producer rather than a consumer. More broadly, I would argue the educative and erotic value of poetry in the sense that it is essentially a practice of subversion: exciting, inventive and creative. Reading—and writing—poetry is a practice of forms. It instructs how to negotiate with tradition, the inherited, the state of things and how to challenge them. It teaches the constant evasion and reconfiguration of forms from within.

Rejecting closure as a fiction, the Language poets vindicate an openness to event, to the foreign. In a postindustrial societies increasingly ruled by statistical predictions, their poetry welcomes the unforeseen, the event. Rosmarie Waldrop insists on the importance of gaps, which she is careful to distinguish from the romantic esthetics of fragment that posits a totality (Retallack and Waldrop). Lyn Hejinian defines openness as an acceptance of what *exceeds* the self". Ambiguity and difficulty produce "unassimilable surpluses of meaning" (Hejinian 332, 333), unassigned added value. And from the reader's point of view, reading becomes an improvisation in a world without providence.

The return of number and method

In order to generate the unforeseen, several Language poets have harnessed number and method in the service of disorder and libertarian politics. This constitutes an interesting case of the return of the repressed, really begun a generation before: rejected by free verse, number and count returned in many of the chance procedures and methods initiated by John Cage and Jackson Mac Low in the 1950s, both avowed anarchists, thus demonstrating that form is not necessarily closed and number not necessarily in the service of rationalism and statistics. Creating the conditions for the interaction of freedom and necessity, Mac Low's performances are like *in vitro* experiments of social interaction and political decision: "The peculiar dialectic of freedom and necessity inherent in their realization embodies basic political and existential truths". They explore ways of "following the rules [...] freely, spontaneously, and cooperatively" (Mac Low in Bernstein 1990, 220). His performances sought to create a dialectic between choice and chance (the "given"), to constitute analogical models of the types of utopian societies usually called "anarchist" ("lacking a coercive state apparatus") and "libertarian" ("maximizing individual liberty"). They also epitomized a basic Buddhist and anarchist paradox: that one may make meaningful choices while being choicelessly aware and fully respecting others' choices. Bernstein claims that Silliman's use of numerical structural programs—in works such as *Tjanting* and *Ketjak*⁴—reveal and renew narrative: "by adding number (numerical structural programs) to narrative, Silliman [...] has awakened such tales from the deep slumber of chronology, causality, and false unity (totalization)." (Beckett).

Method is here taken as a genuinely generative form, a contraption to trap the real, a machine to capture events, hospitable to the unforeseen, welcoming of chance. Improvisation and chance operations embody a refusal to preempt the future, while procedure foregrounds artificiality.

For me, then, the question of procedure is not one of seeking a "correct," or valorized device (e.g., the "new sentence"), but of taking a stance toward language, the activity of composition, and reality, which

⁴ « With *Tjanting*, it took me more than eight months to go from my first rough sketches of what a piece built on the concept of the Fibonacci number series might look like to the composition of a two-word first sentence, "Not this." [...] *Ketjak* is structured so that every paragraph has twice as many sentences as the previous paragraph, with every other sentence being a repetition of the sentences (in exactly the same order) from the previous paragraph. One way to think of *Ketjak* is to imagine putting one sentence on one square of a checkerboard, two on the next, four on the next, and so forth. » (Silliman 1982)

will call forth strategies and structures that are both generative and unconcealing of their constructedness. (Silliman in Beckett)

The turn to method appears as one answer to Lyn Hejinian's quest for **form as activity**:

Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of form in art. Form is not a fixture but an activity. (Hejinian 47)

Finally it is the very notion of form—at least its metaphors—that is being rethought by this generation of poets. Network, (force) field, improvisation, activity, duration ... , their insistence on process rather than product is enough proof that they are not formalist in the traditional sense.

Alternative metaphors of form

“ [M]y concept of form began to be challenged. There are better definitions of space than the Aristotelian model of the container” writes Rosmarie Waldrop, not a Language Poet herself, but a poet with strong sympathies towards many members of the language nexus (with) whom she has often (been) published. Waldrop seeks alternative models —some of these definitions are quotes— such as “not ‘the space in which’ but “the means through which”, “a center around which, not a box within which” (Waldrop 2001, ix), not a kind of “container within which” but an intersection, or multiple intersections around which” (Retallack and Waldrop 370), “a relationship of materials”; because “[o]ur reality is no longer substances, but systems of relations, “no longer things, but what happens between things”. (Waldrop 2001, vii)

I will end this survey of the Language poets' diagnoses and remedies by pointing at how Rosmarie Waldrop's opening of form from within and subversion of (Aristotelian) logic, also reveals an alternative model for identity. Her subversion of logic in *The Lawn of Excluded Middle* and *The Reproduction of Profiles* echoes Lyn Hejinian's determination to expose our habits of reading, of thought and logic—and language is the only access we have to logic. Indeed, Hejinian insists on the need for “a language which generates an array of logics capable, in turn, of generating and responding to encounters and experience. [...] a medium of proliferating connections. It is the logics of these new connections that provide poetry with its enormous mobility and its transformative strategies.” (328).

I tried to work with this challenge, accept the complete sentence (most of the time) and try to subvert its closure and logic from the inside [exemplifying Gordon Lewis's reminder during the conference that “Choice always exceeds options”], by constantly sliding between frames of reference. I especially brought the female body in and set into play the old gender archetypes of logic and mind being “male,” whereas “female” designates the illogical: emotion, body, matter. Again, I hope that the constant sliding challenges these categories.

“You took my temperature which I had meant to save for a more difficult day” (R.W., *The Reproduction of Profiles*, 23) (Waldrop 2000)

I work with the idea of the empty center as a place of resonance and fertility: the womb, the resonance body of an instrument, or, in logic, the excluded middle. So I code as female what refuses the alternative of true or false and what therefore, according to the rules of logic, doesn't exist. This doesn't mean I reject logic (as if one could!), rather I would like to enlarge, enrich it. (Retallack and Waldrop 363)

In this same interview Waldrop suggests that rather than a content, the self is an "empty center", "a kind of crossroads, force field, a "form of taking it all," as Creeley calls the mind. (Retallack and Waldrop 370)

FORUMS (PRONOUNCED *FORMS*) FOR THINKING: COLLABORATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Such renewed view of identity as a site of encounter may explain why, to the exception of the French Oulipo, no group or movement has explored collaboration as systematically as the Language Poets. Writers tend to collaborate with visual artists or musicians but very rarely with other writers. The Romantic ideology of writing as self-expression is deeply ingrained and collaborative attempts are viewed with suspicion. Among their numerous collaborations one may mention: *Legend*, a collaboration between Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray Di Palma, Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman ; *Leningrad*, a collaboration between Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten (San Francisco, Mercury House, 1991) ; *Sight*, written jointly by Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino (Washington, Edge Books, 1998); and most recently the first installment of *The Grand Piano* (Detroit, Mode A, 2006), presented as "An Experiment in Collective Autobiography". Because my focus is here more socio-political, however, I will concentrate on communities and conclude by mentioning a few of these arenas or forums for thinking developed by the Language Poets.

Independent networks of criticism and publication

If the need to cultivate an audience was first diagnosed by Wordsworth, our post-industrial, capitalistic, mass-media society has dramatically intensified that urgent need and that of developing independent networks of criticism and publication⁵. Lyn Hejinian recounts how the Bay Area community of Language poets "began consciously to create an environment for [them]selves—a "workplace," so to speak. Various, we began reading series, talk series, radio program, magazines, presses." (172) Among the "workplaces" developed directly or indirectly under the impulse of Language poets, one might mention the periodical *Poetics Journal*, the *EPC (Electronic Poetry Center)* website, the *Ear Inn* reading series, and publishers such as *Sun & Moon Press* or *Roof Books*.

⁵ I borrow the terms from Jed Rasula : "Responding to McGann, Jed Rasula, a poet and critic closely associated with the language movement, emphasized the primacy of the group. For Rasula, the movement's development of independent networks of criticism and publication was crucial: 'It's a singular phenomenon that poets should come together as active *readers* and conceptually adroit *critics* of one another's work. . . . A politics *in* and a politics *of* American poetry can never arrive at a full collaboration between writer and reader without the deliberate location and cultivation of an audience'" (Perelman 322).

In his 1993 article “Provisional Institutions: Alternative Presses and Poetic Innovation”, Charles Bernstein argues that “Literature is never indifferent to its institutions” and vindicates the need to maintain small and varied communities of readers in the face of the mainstream publishers notion of mass-audience.

The power of our alternative institutions of poetry is their commitment to scales that allow for the flourishing of the artform, not the maximizing of the audience; to production and presentation not publicity; to exploring the known not manufacturing renown. These institutions continue, against all odds, to find value in the local, the particular, the partisan, the committed, the tiny, the peripheral, the unpopular, the eccentric, the difficult, the complex, the homely; and in the formation and reformation, dissolution and questioning, of imaginary or virtual or partial or unavowable communities and/or uncommunities. (Bernstein 1999, 153-4)

Teaching

A second major forum is that of education and several key figures of the Language Movement have more or less belatedly entered academia and been taken on by sometimes prestigious universities. Part of their action has been to reopen and reshape the (especially Modernist) canon, reinstate forgotten authors and defend so-called “illegible” texts. The teaching of the illegible can be vindicated on at least two grounds: first because attention and reading ability are trained by the culture, because “our informal and institutionalized cultural pedagogies shape-quantitatively and qualitatively our geometries of attention” (Retallack 30); secondly, because disjunctive poetry is hardly different from “the everyday cultural experiences of most North Americans, where overlays of competing discourses is an inevitable product of the radio dial, cable television, the telephone, advertising” (Bernstein 1999, 15).

From a pedagogical point of view, Bernstein defines himself as a “social formalist”: “In terms of teaching that means not focusing on the transmission of repeatable information but rather on the production of an environment for encountering, and for reflecting on, art works.” (Bernstein 1999, 251) “Universities can be a crucial base of opposition to the construction of ignorance” if they will resist the “demagogic populism” of discarding “complex or unfamiliar ideas, indeed the compound-complex sentences” as “elitist”. (Bernstein 1999, 16)

Criticism

A third forum invested by the Language poets is that of criticism. A crucial aspect of language writing is their work as theorists, as theorists of poetry, but also as critics of theory. In the same way that they have investigated poetry’s modes of production, they are investigating the politics of the essay and questioning the formalities and conventions of academic writing, urging a critical investigation of the essay as form on the basis that “there can be no neutral form of philosophical or critical argument” and that “criticism’s blindness to the meaning of its forms is a denial of reason in the name of rationality”, hoping that the awareness of the artificiality of the form will enable more creative approaches.

A critique of the essay form would “discuss the ‘well made’ essay and point to its implied valorization of idea to documentation, its positivist/deductivist bias, its emphasis on

communication over the process of thought as extensions of bourgeois/technocratic thought”. (Michael Davidson in Andrews 1984, 149); it would “study the illusion of clarity in criticism [...] in which the contradictions of [the essay form], such as would be revealed through inarticulations, redundancies and non-sequiturs, are subsumed under hypotactic form, rendered invisible rather than resolved” (Silliman 1987, 16); it would explore why “within the academic environment, thought tends to be rationalized —subject to examination, paraphrase, repetition, mechanization, reduction [...] contained and stabilized [to eliminate] the irregular, the nonquantifiable, the nonstandard or nonstandardizable, the erratic, the inchoate. (Bernstein 1999, 42)

Not only is a revolution of the essay form desirable, but a critique of the formats of academic research would in turn challenge teaching practices and academic practices: “A specter is haunting the literary academy: the growing discrepancy between our most advanced theories and institutionally encoded proscriptions on our writing and teaching practices. [...] Will we apply our theories of ambiguity, provisionality, and the nomadic [...] to our own workplace and its administrative and professional apparatuses?” (Bernstein 1999, 90, 50)

Poetry provides a forum for complex thinking

So rather than a mouthpiece, poetry must act as a gadfly to politics. Politics tends to simplify, generalize and conclude while “poetry thickens discussion, refuses reductive formulations” (Bernstein 1999, 240). Even if that means running the risk of jeopardizing efficacy:

We also insist that politics demands complex thinking and that poetry is an arena for such thinking: a place to explore the constitution of meaning, of self, of groups, of nations, of value. The politics of poetry for which I speak is open-ended; the results of its interrogations are not assumed but discovered in the process and available to reformulation. Its complexity and *adversity* to conformity puts such a poetic practice well outside the stadium of dominant culture. It is this refusal of efficacy, call it a refusal of submission, that marks its political character. (Bernstein 1999, 4)

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