How Avant-Gardes Rise, Fall, and Mutate:
The Case of Language Poetry

Marjorie Perloff

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 cénacle, 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. Then I want to turn to more recent "post-Language" experimental practices in what has been called the "expanded field" of poetry, specifically in the areas of performance, visual and sound poetries, and especially conceptualism, which I take to be a kind of umbrella term for the above.

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 a nonreferential, non-syntactic poetry have occurred in any case?

In order to frame this discussion, it will be useful to distinguish between the various avant-garde paradigms that have 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, Khlebnikov, Krushchonykh, 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.

(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 la littérature potentiell*e*,* 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 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*.[2] 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.

(6) 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.

(7) 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 congeries 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, creator of radio plays 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. And, I shall argue below, it is this avant-garde that plays the largest role in what is happening in art- and poetry-making today.

"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.   But—and this is often forgotten today—Language poetry, in its early incarnations, stood in contrast, not only to the "confessional" and "deep image" poetry of the '50s and '60s, but also to the "spontaneous" and speech-based poetics of the various countercultural schools represented in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*—Beat and San Francisco as well as the Black Mountain and New York schools discussed above.   "Whether the raw poetry of the counterculture or the cooked verse of the establishment," Craig Dworkin observes, "personal and emotive expression was seen to be the basis for poetry" (00).

The term "language poetry," Dworkin notes, was probably first used by Bruce Andrews in correspondence of the early 1970s to distinguish poets such as Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Clark Coolidge, and Jackson Mac Low from their contemporaries. Then in 1975, Ron Silliman, who was editing a suite of poems for the "ethnopoetics" journal *Alcheringa*, wrote in his headnote:

> 9 poets out of the present, average age 28, whose work might be said
> to "cluster" about such magazines as *This*, *Big Deal*, *Tottel's*, the recent *Doones*
> supplements, the [Bruce] Andrews-edited issue of *Toothpick*, etc. Called variously
> "language-centered," "minimal," "non-referential formalism," "diminished
> referentiality," "structuralist." Not a *group* but a *tendency* in the work of many. (00)

The writers in question include Bruce Andrews, Barbara Barracks, Clark Coolidge, Lee DeJasu, Ray DiPalma, Robert Grenier, David Melnick, Barrett Watten, and Silliman himself. Meanwhile, in his own journal *This*, Barrett Watten added to this list Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Lyn Hejinian, and Kit Robinson.

The nominalization of the term "language poetry" became official with the launch of Bruce Andrews' and Charles Bernstein's little mimeograph journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1978.   In its pages, later disseminated much more widely in *The*

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book of 1984, 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 artifice, 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, incompletion, ad 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).[3] 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.[4] 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 and of poetry as a vehicle for the communication of a set of prior 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).[5]

What Bernstein dismisses as the "transom theory of communication" (the "two-way wire with the message shuttling back and forth in blissful ignorance of its transom")[6] 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).[7]   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 reifation 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 at the intersection of social institutions; (2) poetry rejects the "referential fallacy" in favor of the play of signifiers that are suggestive and multivalent; (3) poetry replaces authorial control over the text with what Foucault has defined as the author function, 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 called "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 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 component. 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*," Joan Retallack's "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge"—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*.[9] 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,*

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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,[10] 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" poetries of these nations. In the U.S, UK, 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 their fleeting feelings, but an *intellectual* discipline dealing with the most pressing philosophical, political, 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 s 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" reppearance 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 disperes the authorial lyric "I," 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). Indeed, what we now have in the academy, is a kind of curricular avant-garde in the form of a second-generation Language Poetry that seems—at least to me—to be spinning its wheels, try as it may to separate itself from its now famous predecessors by emphasizing the "new spirituality," the "new lyric," and so on.

Influence, in any case, never moves in a straight line: consider the case of second-generation New York abstract expressionist painting (Norman Bluhm, Larry Poons, Grace Hartigan etc.), which quickly found itself eclipsed by artists, whether Pop, Minimalist, Conceptualist or Color Field, who revolted against its very principles. And indeed, the situation of 2004 is very different from that of 1984. The digital revolution has intervened, and we are still trying to come to terms with its fallout. The repudiation of the "natural look," for starters, no longer has the urgency it once had: as mediated by the internet, no discourse can be fully "natural"; on screen, it is always already simulated and simulatable. Spontaneity, improvisation, "first thought, best thought"—these are values inimical to the calculation that by definition generates digital text. 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. It is also the case that the enthusiasm for what Umberto Eco called "open text" and for the Barthean notion that "the death of the author" makes way for the birth of the reader has been somewhat dampened by the specter of defensive Language poets informing their critics that, in the words of Eliot's society matron, "That is

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not what I meant at all." Indeed, it could be argued –and this was already the case for the ostensibly non-directive John Cage—never before have poets so tightly controlled the production and dissemination of their texts.

What about the fabled disappearance of the referent? On screen and online, the transparency of the signifier is no longer even at issue; the notion of language as a system of signs with its own semiological relationships is now widely accepted, the challenge being less to counter "the arrow of reference," as McCaffery called it, than to "write through" given texts so as to put earlier meanings into play, for example, McCaffery's own "Dark Ladies" sequence, a wittily rule-governed language game transforming Shakespeare's sonnets, or, in a somewhat different pataphysical move, Kenneth Goldsmith's *No. 111: 2.7.93-10.20.96***,** an encyclopedic compendium of phrases (from one-syllable words, organized alphabetically, to D. H. Lawrence's entire short story "The Rocking Horse Winner") that end on the sound of schwa (*er)*, the commonest sound in the English language. Goldsmith's transcription uses whatever he finds in his linguistic environment: television and usernet groups, conversations and telephone calls, books and newspaper articles. The result, in the early sections of the book, is a dense rhyming and rhythmic play, as in this extract from the four-syllable units:

> patch it over, paternoster, pay the piper, paying Peter, peanut bladder, peanut
> butter, pebbledropper, pecking order, peculator, pedicular, peever peever, peninsula,
> penny loafers, pentangula, penultima, people are rare, people-hater, pepper the air,
> Pepsi-Cola, peptic ulcer, per capita, per customer, Perestroika, perfect posture,
> perform pooja, perform rumor, perimeter (39)

Reference, in such catalogues, has a curious status: on the one hand, the "arrow of reference" follows a normally denotative path, pointing to things "outside" of language. On the other, the interaction of verbal and subverbal units within the text itself generates its own meanings. How does Perestroika relate to the doling out of one item "per customer" or to 'perfect posture"? And so on.

Then, too, Goldsmith's elaborate compositional device works within the parameters, not of the page, but of the book, or, in its digital version, the screen. And here again, we may note an important difference between such post-Language works and their predecessors. Language poetry, however agonistic it may have been vis-à-vis the mainstream, was, like the other poetries of the time, almost exclusively a page-based phenomenon. Whether the poems in question were long or short, in verse or in prose, they were discrete entities, designed to occupy the space between the margins of a given page or set of pages. But what happens when the page gives way to the screen, which offers no

such subdivisions? Or when poetry moves off the page and onto the CD or the MP3?   In his essay on the audio-poem, written for Dee Morris's *Sound States* (1999), Steve McCaffery writes:

> The popular availability of the tape recorder to sound poets made audiotechnological advancement of the art form a reality. Tape provided the revolutionary capability to finally transcend the biological limits of human bodily expression. Considered as an extension of human vocality, the tape recorder permits the poet to move beyond her or his own physical limitations. With the body no longer an ultimate, inflexible parameter, voice becomes a point of departure, not a teleologically prescribed point of arrival. The tape recorder creates a secondary orality predicated on a graphism. . . . *Cutting, in effect, becomes the potential compositional basis in which vocal segments can be arranged and rearranged outside the binding unindirectionality of real-time performance.* (157, my emphasis)

Isn't cutting, as here described (and John Cage had made a similar point years earlier), [11] merely the sonic equivalent of the collage-cut that Language poetry inherited from Modernist texts, beginning with Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* and Pound's *Cantos*? Not really, because the technique McCaffery describes allows the poet—in this case, a sound poet like Henri Chopin, who is McCaffery's subject, to create dialogue with the medium itself. In the performance poetries today—for example those of chris cheek or Caroline Bergvall—the "unidirectionality of real-time performance" gives way to the more fractal arrangements Joan Retallack discusses in *The Poethical Wager*.

The reaching out, in midstream, to other senses and other media is, in any case, a decisive change in contemporary poetics. . Language poetry, let's recall, was concerned primarily with *semantic* possibilities, as those possibilities had been defined in post-structuralist theory. The dispersal of the author and corresponding empowerment of the reader, the denial of direct communication and textual transparency, the coupling of poetry and theory, the adoption of a "new" prose—these innovations were not necessarily accompanied by comparable innovations in sound structuring, visual form, or digital analogue. Indeed, the free verse and "new sentence" poetry that had become a staple of neo-Language poetry by the mid-nineties was not all that different, in turned out, from the Establishment poetry that was, at least nominally, still under attack

The past decade has thus been a time of uneasy rapprochement, with Language poets frequently performing at poetry readings with their one-time enemies. In such venues as the Buffalo Poetics program, second-generation New York School poets like Alice Notley and Ted Berrigan have become very popular, even though their treatment of the lyric self,

of the function of language and referentiality, and of "natural" speech is the very antithesis of what Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, or Lyn Hejinian had advocated in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. And Hejinian herself has recently made the selection for the David Lehman annual, *The Best American Poetry of 2004*, trying to create what she calls a "picaresque adventure . . .across innumerable sites and through diverse situations," so as to include poets as unlike as Robert Pinsky and Ron Silliman, Rita Dove and Rae Armantrout—a "miscellany" that, judging from the indignant reviews on amazon.com is likely to satisfy neither the mainstream nor the peripheries.[12]

Meanwhile, as websites like Kenneth Goldsmith's *ubu.com* make clear, a poetics for the digital age 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 and the soundworks of the Four Horsemen. And further, as Craig Dworkin's online *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."

That commonality (or interdisciplarity) may be seen in such recent works as Susan Howe's *The Midnight*, which juxtaposes impassioned lyric, treated photograph, facsimile book page, and documentary material to produce a completely new kind of memorial text, an elegy for the poet's mother, the Irish actress Molly Howe. Or again, in Maggie O'Sullivan's artist's book *Red Deeps*, whose pages become verbal-visual scores for elaborate soundings, based on folkloric materials from early Ireland and Wales. Or in the ekphrases of Cole Swensen's *Goest* and *Such Rich Hour*, where the subjects of the poet's ekphrases, missing from the text itself, carry her meanings in tantalizing ways. Or in Charles Bernstein's opera *Shadowtime*, written with the composer Brian Ferneyhough, not as a conventional libretto, but as a poetic text that often initiates and guides the course of the musical score than vice-versa. Or in such adaptations of *Oulipo* principles as Christian Bök's amazing alphabetical tour de force called *Eunoia*. Or in what I have referred to elsewhere (Perloff 2002) as the "differential" texts of Caroline Bergvall and Kenneth Goldsmith--texts whose performance versions are not equivalent to their printed or digital ones but rather allow the variants a life of their own, even as their juxtaposition creates new meanings.

Indeed, textual rather than semantic indeterminacy (which one *is* the "real" text anyway?) may be a hallmark of this contemporary avant-garde.

That means, of course, that anthologizing is out of order. But the print anthology is itself a genre that may, at least for the moment, be obsolete, given the countless possibilities for creating an anthology of one's own, culled from one's particular performative and digital experiences. Then, too, anthologies act as equalizers, whereas what is striking about the present moment in poetry is the ability of individual poets—Susan Howe, for example—to transcend their "language poetry" origins. But then Howe began her career as a conceptual artist, even as McCaffery was first a concretist, then a sound poet, and only then affiliated with the Language cenacle. Again, Charles Bernstein's *Conversation with David Antin* (Granary 2001) reveals an ironic Jewish strain that relates Bernstein more closely to the older "talk poet" than to a fellow language poet like Ron Silliman or even Bruce Andrews.

But weren't affiliations always thus? I come back to the Russian avant-garde with which I began and note that for a young Russian-American poet like Eugene Ostrashevsky, now living in New York, Anna Akhmatova is not "interesting," given her status as a "classic" poet who surely has nothing to do with the avant-garde of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, much less the Oberiyu poets of the 1920s. But then I remember that before the Revolution, the young Akhmatova read at the Stray Dog Café with Khlebnikov on a number of occasions, and that she later invoked his presence in her long Byronic work *Poem Without a Hero*. Is the link significant? To ask the question is, in any case, to thicken the plot.

Footnotes

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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 potientielle*; *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).

[6] Charles Bernstein, "Introduction" to "Language Sampler," *Paris Review* 86 (1982); rpt. in CB, pp. 239-43; see p. 239.

[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 *21st Century Modernism*.

[10] No language poet has thus far won a MacArthur Fellowship. A few—Bernstein, Howe, Michael Palmer-- have won Guggenheims 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.

[11] In a 1984 interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Cage talks about the creation of *Williams Mix* (1953), asconceived "with excitement over the possibilities of magnetic tape." "I found various ways of changing sound," Cage recalls, "not with dials but, rather, by physically cutting the tape," Kostelanetz 102.

[12] Thus a writer named Bruce McBirney from LaCresecenta, CA praises the few"good" writers in the anthology (e.g., Yussef Komuniakaa, and then adds," Ironically, the writing here isn't so new or avant-garde as its proponents may think. The average age of the 75 poets in this book is about 54, and over two-thirds of the poets were born in 1954 or before. There's nothing wrong with age--I'm 50 myself. My point is that the supposed meaningfulness of meaninglessness has been part of the literary and artistic scene for decades now...and has become a cliche itself. This isn't really all that fresh."

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