

Radical Collages

HANK LAZER

You will not find the poems of "language poets" in *The American Poetry Review*, *The New Yorker* or *Poetry*; you will seldom see their work reviewed there or in *The New York Times*; nor will many of them be offered teaching positions or readings through the M.F.A. industry and the associated writing programs. But for over twenty years, in magazines such as *Joglers* (1964-65), *Tottel's* (1971-81), *This* (1971 to the present) and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978-81), the language poets have been building a poetry network outside the universities and official verse culture. By now, this movement (based principally in New York City and in the San Francisco bay area) has given us a body of writing that may be the most significant in American poetry since the modernists. Readers unfamiliar with language writing will, in all probability, initially read this new poetry with frustration and anger. But this discomfort, a common reaction to new art generally, is analogous to the antagonism to the poetry of John Ashbery fifteen years ago or to the writings of Eliot and Pound earlier in the century. Language writing too calls for new reading skills.

Following upon the most adventurous work of Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams and Jack Spicer, language writing can be seen as an oppositional literary practice that questions many of the assumptions of mainstream poetry. Instead of considering poetry as a staging ground for the creation and expression of an "authentic" voice and personality, language poetry arises out of an "exploded self," blurs genre boundaries (not only the boundary between poetry and prose but also the ones between poet and critic, between poetry and criticism) and seeks actively collaborative relationships between reader and writer. If there is a central assumption in language writing, it is that language is experience-engendering, rather than that the writer's task is to find language to re-present experiences that, somehow, exist outside of or prior to language.

Hank Lazer's essays have appeared in Virginia Quarterly, Southern Review, Boundary 2 and elsewhere.

Language writing challenges American poets to be something other than ornaments to the national culture and to resist what Laura Riding once called "the forced professionalization of poetry." In *The New Sentence*, a collection of essays, Ron Silliman reminds us,

IN THIS REVIEW

THE NEW SENTENCE. By Ron Silliman. Roof Books. 209 pp. Paper \$10.

LIT. By Ron Silliman. Potes & Poets Press. 70 pp. Paper \$7.50.

ARTIFICE OF ABSORPTION. By Charles Bernstein. Singing Horse Press. 71 pp. Paper \$5.

THE SOPHIST. By Charles Bernstein. Sun & Moon Press. 179 pp. \$16.95. Paper \$11.95.

FURTHER READING

IN THE AMERICAN TREE. Edited by Ron Silliman. National Poetry Foundation. 628 pp. \$45. Paper \$18.95.

"LANGUAGE" POETRIES. Edited by Douglas Messerli. New Directions. 192 pp. \$21.95. Paper \$8.95.

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"Poetry is part of a larger, oppositional strategy and cannot be viewed as an end in itself." His contribution to language writing and to our particular moment in literary history is to fuse the aesthetic and the political:

The problem of poetry at the end of the 20th century is who shall write it,

not in the sense of which persons, but rather persons of what order? How will they be constituted, understand their own "individuality," and relate this to such audiences as each attempts to construct? Such questions are both literary and social.

Silliman, who worked for a number of years in the California prison movement and is currently the executive editor of *Socialist Review*, argues that

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.

For Silliman, "poetics must be concerned with the process by which writing is organized politically into literature," and "there can be no such thing as a formal problem in poetry which is not a social one as well."

Silliman, who has published thirteen books of poetry, has been at work on a massive project called *The Alphabet* since 1980. He has completed seventeen of *The Alphabet's* twenty-six books, of which *Lit* (for the letter "L") is the twelfth. *Lit* typifies Silliman's structuralist work: The book consists of twelve sections, each with a formal relationship to the number twelve. The guiding structural concept for *Lit* is stated in section eight, from Thoreau's *Journal*: "Let there be as many distinct plants as the soil and the light can sustain."

In spite of its careful constructions, *Lit* feels neither rigid nor constrained. Silliman's writing is fun to read: Its pleasure lies in the gradual unfolding of intricate forms and in the mix of puns, declarations, sounds and sights from our daily environment, the range of references from philosophy to baseball. In the course of *Lit*, we encounter an outrageous array of sentences: "History leads to the t-shirt"; "Between language and thought/stands a cop"; "A minor leaguer to be named Later"; "I don't intend to homogenize my meaning for the sake of an enemy"; "The shadow of Stein crosses the text." As with the repetition and modulation of basic rhythm and melodies in the minimalist music of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, key words and sentences echo throughout *Lit*, providing a pleasing familiarity and recurrence. Silliman's humor partakes of the exuberant, deflating coolness of the postmodern, whether he is parodying the proverbial—"Nature abhors a dachshund"—or parodying the moderns: "I

know a house of mud and wattles made (no I don't)"; "Tamed by Milton, I lie on Mother's head"; "make it noise"; and "The antennae of the race have been snapped off by idle youth."

Silliman, who never graduated from college but who, by the time he was 21, had had poems accepted by *Poetry*, *Chicago Review*, *Southern Review*, *Tri-Quarterly* and others, can employ a conventionally lyrical style—"India my Indiana, say that particulars do not fade nor rust consumed in their own dust, or that memory's fair, an old funeral barely the scene of thought's return"—but the display of a lyrical bauble is not his goal. Instead, he immerses us in a welter of details, dictions, awarenesses and perspectives, as in the fifth paragraph of the final section of *Lit*:

The yard understood as a mixture of motives, porch paint spotting sage and spider, sawdust and old boards killing the lawn, strange bird half yodels in the plum tree against the sound of a garden hose inside a trash can or another bird's higher trill, ears absorb while the eye scans, skin senses the fog's damp, butt upon the step, sound of a broom in which driveway, wind felt in eyebrow's hair, here in the little things (who I am), three flies articulate the sky between porch & tree, poetry is that this thought thus, body but a metaphor (who I was) for a medical model of that thing lit. Of late much work, little light, leads humor stuttering home, get the lead out (of the pencil, the penis), the point scratching paper's skin seen to signify mind means the made marks the maker's mask (meet science), ear stitched to side of head, hard wood weds floor to foot (I am not that), float from word to word as if there were a reason, as if there were reason, beyond *as* and *es*. "Ease awes," guffaws the talking mule, eyes as corrective to ear's reduction of kitten's seductive vocabulary turned to "mews" is snot enough to lose amid typos the essence of our text beckoning assent. Anxiety of response conducts meaning to lowest denominator, prefaces foreplay plying tongue to punctuation, a setup. "My reputation is in your mouth" is in your mind (read aloud) allows no reading. Speak up or forever hold your piece: this is the place. Word bytes man, and the apple drops. Submit to reading. Now read this. And this. This. This.

This paragraph exemplifies the poet's ongoing attempt to make the moment of composition part of the text, as well as some of the ways in which his text engages our own reading of it. Here it is

"point scratching paper's skin"; midway in the book, "A/young Asian man wearing thick glasses watches me write this through the window of the laundromat where/two small boys circle the washers, playing tag"; near the book's end, "activity grounded in its own proceeding, bleeding store-bought ink onto spongy page."

There is a distinctly utopian strain to Silliman's writing, perhaps because "the writer cannot organize her desires for writing without some vision of the world toward which one hopes to work, and without having some concept of how literature might participate in such a future." Silliman's writing inspires us precisely because of its kind of labor: "Among the several social functions of poetry is that of posing a model of unalienated work: it stands in relation to the rest of society both as utopian possibility and constant reminder of just how bad things are."

In contrast to Silliman's poetry of the declarative sentence, Charles Bernstein's writing presents greater initial stylistic difficulties, in part because it blurs the boundaries between poetry and philosophy. *The Sophist*, his most recent collection of poetry, attempts to undo the damage that has accumulated since Western culture absorbed Plato's fear of poetry. Silliman describes Bernstein's stance as one that enables him "to 'liberate' philosophy from its context of professional pedantry by preferring the decentralized, economic marginality of poetry as the discourse through which to proceed." In *Artifice of Absorption*, a book-length essay on poetics written in the form of a poem, Bernstein declares his "insistence/that poetry be understood as epistemological/inquiry." Like Silliman, he attacks the narrowness of official verse culture, which Bernstein claims has for the past twenty-five years "engaged in militant/(that is to say ungenerously uniformitarian)/campaigns to 'restrict the subversive,/independent-of-things nature of language'/in the name of the common voice, clarity, sincerity,/or directness of the poem." Through an oppositional and transgressive poetic practice, Bernstein wishes to end the "monotonizing of experience" which comes from a plot-centered insistence on the sole legitimacy of "clear writing."

The Sophist, a 177-page collection of thirty-six poems written over a ten-year period, is Bernstein's most important book of poetry to date. As the title sug-

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gests, the book affirms poetry as a form of philosophical inquiry and acknowledges the place of rhetoric as primary in producing thought and meaning. Paradoxically, the book is unified by a principle of difference: Each poem differs radically (in style and layout) from the previous one. Throughout his career, Bernstein has worked scrupulously to achieve a poetry that resists the staple of the M.F.A. industry's version of poetic craft: the achievement of a distinct voice: This is not to say that Bernstein is incapable of writing beautifully lyrical lines of poetry, as in the concluding lines to "The Voyage of Life":

We

Carve and so are carved in twofold
swiftness
Of manifold: the simple act of
speak-

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Ing, having heard, of crossing, having creased.

Sow not, lest reap, and choke on blooming things:

Innovation is Satan's toy, a train That rails to semblance, place of memory's

Loss. Or tossed in tune, emboss with gloss in-Signias of air.

Bernstein can sound the register of late nineteenth-century impressionism, as in "From Lines of Swinburne"; "As a voice in a vision that's vanished/Perjured dark and barer accusation/Song of a pole congealed/Whose soul a mark lost in the whirling snow." But he serves up lines that, while they have the sound and rhythm of familiar form, withdraw from a fixed content or subject. Unlike Ashbery, who finally does settle upon a recognizable, laconic, bemused voice, Bernstein gives enough space to so many vocabularies and rhetorics that no one style or position can possibly emerge as comprehensive. His forte as a poet may prove to be a form of radical collage, with a new rapidity and elusiveness. Often, as in Silliman's poetry in prose, he stitches fabric together at the level of the sentence, as in "Surface Reflectance":

Debby

had just about tied the bow of her pink taffeta dress when she heard the porch door creak open. "At least when I close my eyes nobody can see me." Early warning sighs. Buttrussing bronchodilation, arcadian
microseconds jostling pansynchronous
obsidian vases in the
collation of infrequent mention.

In "Amblyopia" various typefaces reinforce the multiple planes of discourse:

Blessed are the grieved for
they at least have seen their
inheritance; the rest wait in maxivans
to collect as available. THE BITTER
COKE
OF JIMMY CARTER; the greased
palm, the
adored swan; all are crepuscular,
dilated, dogged, dictated.

Bernstein states quite clearly the kind of writing and thinking that do not interest him: "Each limb flows gracefully into/the next, with the effortlessness of good thinking."

Bernstein's recent work, both in *Artifice of Absorption* and *The Sophist*, makes it clear that, while a master ironist (in Kierkegaard's sense of irony as a withdrawal of content), he is, like Silliman, a poet given to affirmation and to a distinctly utopian vision. His affirma-

tive view stems from his critique of the supposed opposition between thought and emotion. In "The Only Utopia Is in a Now," Bernstein ridicules the assumptions of much mainstream poetry, particularly the aversion to so-called abstract thinking:

"On this block," the voice was steady now and almost seemed to sing, "what is called 'thinking' is absolutely forbidden in the name of what is called 'emotion.' You're only supposed to write and say what everyone else knows, and to write and say it in the way everyone else has already heard it. In fact, they issue a manual, *Acceptable Words and Word Combinations* and everyone talks and writes only in permutations derived from this book."

But Bernstein's guiding premise is that "emotion doesn't express itself only in words we already know." He reverses polarities on his mainstream opponents: "The people here are so ideologically pro-emotion they make it into an abstract concept that is more theoretical than the intellectuality they renounce." In an exhortation to all language-users to embrace experimentation and discovery, to resist and question standardizations of expression and use, the poem concludes, "Don't be afraid, gentle writers, gentle speakers, that you won't communicate or will be too intellectual. Only when such concerns fall away, like calluses from our tongues, and we are left just to do and be, not trying to communicate out of a fear of being unable to, will language take its rightful place as love." For Bernstein new forms of written expression affirm our common birthright as language-users, able to question and make the meanings and truths by which we situate and construct ourselves in this world.

The writings of the language poets, and especially recent work by Silliman and Bernstein, offer us an accomplished poetry as a revived medium for thought and pleasure. Yet, the dismissal and suppression of language writing make pertinent Gertrude Stein's observations in her 1926 lecture "Composition as Explanation," where she laments the slow acceptance of new methods of composition:

and it is very much too bad, it is so very much more exciting and satisfactory for everybody if one can have contemporaries, if all one's contemporaries could be one's contemporaries.

For indeed the language poets present some of the finest expressions of our worthy contemporaries. □