The Meta-Physick of Play
L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E U.S.A.

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book. Edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Southern Illinois University Press 1984. xi + 295 pp. $12.95.

The Difficulties: Charles Bernstein Issue (Volume 2, No. 1). Edited by Tom Beckett. Fall, 1982. 116 pp. $6.00 (paper).

Bruce Andrews. *Praxis.* Tuumba Press 1978. Unpaginated. $2.00 (paper).

P. Inman. *Ocker.* Tuumba Press 1982. Unpaginated. $3.00 (paper).

James Sherry. *Converses.* Awede Press 1982. Unpaginated. $5.00 (paper).

Douglas Messerli. *Some Distance.* Segue 1982. 47 pp. $4.00 (paper).

Charles Bernstein. *Resistance.* Awede Press 1983. Unpaginated. $6.00 (paper).

Hannah Weiner. *Sixteen.* Awede Press 1983. Unpaginated. $6.00 (paper).

Hannah Weiner. *Spoke.* Washington, D.C.: Sun & Moon Press 1984. 115 pp. $6.95 (paper).

Tina Darragh. *Pi in the Skye.* Ferguson/Franzino 1980. 12 pp. $2.00 (paper).

Physick   *n. Medicine, expecially a purgative. Wholesome or curative regimen or habit*

Nashe (1589) *I wold perswade them to phisicke their faculties of seeing and hearing. (OED)*

Playing is inherently exciting and precarious.
(D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*)

Blips and Ifs

Painting by
Stuart Davis

(Courtesy of
Amon Carter
Museum, Fort
Worth, Texas)

I.

It's called "Language Poetry," which is odd enough. Isn't all poetry made of language? And then there are all those equal signs in the official logo, the name of the magazine that was for four years the chief forum of the movement. Is the implication that all letters are equal? Surely not. If all letters were equal we'd have no words. It's their unique and very unequal roles that make language possible. Perhaps the Language poets have a different sort of egalitarianism in mind—from each according to ability; to each according to need. No elitists among letters (or words), no imperious Ps or Qs. No privileged access to meaning. After all, Language poetry with its Marxist origins is out to skim or scrape the bourgeois fat off the language.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is the emblem, of course, of a different sort of elitism —from those of purer vision; to those of . . . purer vision. This is nothing new in the annals of avant garde movements. Pushing the logic of possibility to extremes, like Theoretical Physicists or pioneers in the study of Artificial Intelligence, the Language poets have aimed their work at a relatively small audience which agrees upon the importance of certain questions, though not necessarily upon the nature of the answers. The emphasis is on a proliferation of experiments; the excitement lies in not really knowing where the inquiry will lead. The central question, which they share with their audience (largely other poets), is, How do changes in the forms of our language affect our experience in the world? Though their abundant theoretical writing on this question sometimes has the stale breath of closure, if not out-and-out dogmatism, it functions effectively to open up a wide field of play and experimentation in their poetry.

In fact, experimentation *is* a form of play and visa versa. As such, it is as Winnicott says "exciting and precarious [belonging] to the interplay . . . of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality)." This is as true in the sciences as it is in the arts. In all cases, Winnicott stresses, "a paradox is involved which needs to be accepted, tolerated, and not resolved." The paradox inherent in language is that it is at one and the same time deeply personal and conventional. It must serve equally the needs of both individual and group. There cannot be an exclusively private language; neither can there be an entirely public one. Language both conceals and reveals; is emotionally charged and uniformly dispassionate; is mysterious and

plain; it both shapes and is shaped by our experience. The tension arising out of these lively oppositions can produce creativity or despair; or in work like Beckett's, a strange equilibrium which floats precariously on the surface membrane of non- or mis-communication.

Whether the poets under review achieve in their work some sort of equilibrium (Darragh, Weiner, Andrews, Messerli), or a studied disequilibrium (Sherry, Dewdney), or something that has more to do with mime than juxtapositional acrobatics (Bernstein, Inman), they all resist resolution and closure in their poetry; they are all, in Winnicott's sense, at play. This is not a Wordsworthian notion of enlightened regression to childhood perceptions. Play, of the sort Winnicott means, is a practice we must continually renew in ways appropriate to our maturing vision, in order to keep the imagination vigorous. Without it we are depressed creatures of habit and circumstance; it is the meta-physickal practice of the healthy spirit. If they are good, artists, philosophers, Zen masters, and psychoanalysts (like Winnicott, who sees psychotherapy as a form of play)—teachers of all kinds—keep us in training.

Play, from early childhood on, is a rigorous discipline—requiring acute focus and concentration (not all children do it well) along with unfettered ingenuity. It requires a wholeness of being and response that embraces our rationality and emotions, our logic and intuition. As adults we need to concoct complicated justifications for play—themselves forms of play—because we don't entirely trust it as really worthwhile and serious, much less essential to our vitality. The very serious Language poets, whose goal can be seen as a kind of sociolinguistic therapy (they would probably prefer "politics") acquire their sanction to play from a rich diversity of ancestors and theoretical sources: ancient charm songs; Old English and Chaucerian modes; the sound poetry of the Russian Futurists; their very American interest in compositional strategies, vagaries, and disjunctions of everyday speech; the formal preoccupations of Gertrude Stein and John Cage and the Concrete poets; the "Indeterminist" effects of Pound, Beckett, and John Ashbery; Jackson Mac Low, Zukofsky, David Antin. . . . The list could go on; the Language poets are extremely well read. But the poetry itself gains its distinction from the peculiarly American pragmatic inventiveness which (reminiscent of developments in the visual arts in America since the '50s) pays intense attention to the particulars of the medium—phonemes, syntax, graphics, etc.—to the anatomy of language itself.

However, one gets the sense that the really official permission slip for play, the identification of what is and what is not "Language poetry," the cultivation of a community of writers, the formation of a highly intelligent and interested audience are heavily dependent on philosophical progenitors, most notably Marx, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. The leading theoreticians of the Language group—Ron Silliman, Steve McCaffery, Bruce Andrews, and Charles Bernstein have entered the debate over the relation between language, thought, and reality and see their work, both theoretical and poetical, as a contribution to it.

Without recalling the peculiar status of Language these days, the new nominalism in Western intellectual circles, along with the widespread disrepute of so-called "naive realism," the radical disruptions of the Language poets may seem unaccountably frivolous, if not destructive of all that is reliable and sound.

II.

Refusing to 'point,' or to be arranged according to a 'pointing system,' they risk the charge of being pointless.

(Bruce Andrews, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book,* * p. 35).

In these times when Consensus has replaced Truth, we are mature enough to have intercourse with a reality we can simultaneously disavow. The intercourse, we can say, is, in reality, among ourselves—a cross-fertilization of Subjectivities not only couched in, but generated by language, as Lacan and Derrida claim, expelling all augurs of otherness from the prelinguistic Eden we used to call the world. When the Language Mafia (thought by some to include Wittgenstein as well as the notorious French Deconstructionists) is through theorizing, all we seem to be left with is language, emptied of referents, pointing with a finger ominously curved toward itself; mere wordplay—solipsistic, in fact, perverse.

The preceding is a lover's complaint, heard in those quarters where unadulterated Reality is still a matter of faith, if not ideology; where stalwart and besieged "naive realists" shudder and tingle like Platonists

*hereafter referred to as *LB*.

at the pallor of our imitations (art, science, literature)—a pallor which, under optimum conditions should blanch into absolute transparency, revealing the Object in all its stolid splendor.

> . . . *the consumer of a mass market novel such as* Jaws *stares numbly at a "blank" page (the page also of the speed-reader) while a story appears to unfold miraculously of its own free will before his or her eyes. The presence of language appears as recessive as the sub-title of a foreign language film.*
>
> (Ron Silliman, *LB* p. 127)

Yes, its downright bracing to be direct and to the point, which is there like the fin of the white shark or Mt. Everest or Destiny, or the extreme piquancy of the quotidian. Is it not the great human enterprise to move in glorious transit from solidly grounded particulars via symbolic systems toward (depending on whether our tendencies are Aristotelian or Platonist) a flawless mirror of Nature or squeegee-cleaned window on transcendent Truth? The point, whatever the metaphor of transparency may be, is that we gain access through a self-effacing medium to a world fully furnished and ready for inspection. We do not create it; we view it, attempt to predict and control it; to tame it, turning brute given into laboratory rat or dancing bear. It is this seamless, well-appointed, orderly world view Language philosophers (French and American—not necessarily Wittgenstein) seem to be telling us is not a world at all but a construct fashioned entirely of language. They want, in other words (there are only words) to deprive us of *everything* but words and other words.

> *Once Jennie had everything. She slept on a round pillow upstairs and a square pillow downstairs. She had her own comb and brush, two different bottles of pills, eyedrops, eardrops, a thermometer, and for cold weather a red wool sweater. There were two windows for her to look out of and two bowls to eat from. She even had a master who loved her.*
>
> *But Jennie didn't care. In the middle of the night she packed everything in a black leather bag with gold buckles and looked out of her favorite window for the last time.*
>
> *"You have everything," said the potted plant that happened to be looking out the same window. . . .*
>
> *"That is true," said Jennie. . . .*
>
> *"Then why are you leaving?"*

> *"Because," said Jennie . . . "I am discontented. I want something I do not have. There must be more to life than having everything!"*
>
> (Maurice Sendak, *Higglety Pigglety Pop! or There Must Be More To Life*, pp. 3–4)

Jennie, a product of haute-canine bourgeois society (she is a charming, low-slung terrier), is also a product of our Collective Unconscious. We are stirred by the "must be more to life" motif, but we do not want any unpleasant aesthetic ruptures. She abandons her secure, well equipped, but *passive* (boring) existence for an *active* career as leading lady with The World Mother Goose Theater—*Mother Goose* where violent semantic disjunctions, not to say beatings, squeezings, suffocations, and decapitations can take place within the sing-song *petit monde* of the nursery rhyme. As Bruno Bettleheim has suggested in *The Uses of Enchantment*, and Aristotle before him in the *Poetics*, we need to acknowledge and contain such stirrings within acceptable forms in order to remain reasonably well adjusted to civilization and its discontents. These views however presuppose a basically passive audience (reader) acted upon by the work (text) which is in effect a replica of the very world Jennie fled—one where, if you are lucky, everything is taken care of; beginnings, middles, ends, and all you are to think and feel along the way carefully designed by the artist. Winnicott's idea of play as risk-taking activity—subject acting on, shaping, her or his world—is more appropriate to recent disquieting projects of the American Language avant-garde which is most assuredly interested in not adjustment but change. Like their acknowledged ancestors, the Russian Futurists, they have visions of a new and better world, a world shaped by a decontaminated, destabilized, active language—informed by revolutionary praxis.

It can be difficult, though, given any sort of realist presumptions, to imagine a world corresponding to a text like this one from Bruce Andrews' *PRAXIS*:

> to affect a forced cheerfulness
> traditionally accepted
> fingers end
> point downwards
> being the nostrils
> for the graphical evidence

I prefer
babbled of
singing of anthems
of the death of Socrates
compradorial
some stew
and so upwards and upwards
unnecessarily
I take to be normalized
a hospitalled repentence
lunatic
burnished

or this, from James Sherry's *Converses*:

yes yes	.	moral, moralizing, moralist
well then	.	discrepency
but but	.	(spirit gum)

Searching for direct or "one-to-one" correspondence won't get us any-where with these texts. As Wittgenstein would put it, this seems to be a different language game. As a devil's advocate might put it, this does not appear to enlarge or enrich or extend our sense of reality "one jot." It seems self-indulgent and remote. Will we allow ourselves to fall into this kind of linguo-centric decadence, fatuously entertained by planets and stars in our own taxonomic heavens? In short, despite a strangely engaging vitality, some humor, some pith, Andrews and Sherry seem to be present-ing us with no more than detached bits of language—just playing with words. Don't they have more serious things to do?

> *There are, alas, people nowadays who owlishly inform us "philosophy has proved" that language does not refer to anything nonlinguistic, and thus that everything one can talk about is a text. This claim is on a par with the claim that Kant proved that we cannot know about things-in-themselves. Both claims rest on a phony contrast between some sort of nondiscursive unmediated vision of the real and the way we actually talk and think. Both falsely infer from "We can't think without concepts, or talk without words" to "We can't think or talk except about what has been created by our thought or talk."*

> (Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* pp. 154–55)

Have our American Language poets, who should be more sensible and pragmatic, fallen prey to this fallacy of the hermetic French intellectual scene? If we listen to Steve McCaffery, editor of a symposium on "The Politics of the Referent," the answer would seem to be yes:

> . . . the foremost task at hand . . . is to demystify the referential fallacy of language. . . . Language centered writing shows a concern with the order of effects that connect with the signifier rather than the referent. . . . Once the fallacy of the referent is revealed for what it is then we are able to see language as that highly complex play of signifiers detached from stable signifieds; a language no longer representing a world outside of itself, but a language obeying its own constitution and dynamic.

> ("The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing," L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Supplement #1, June 1980)

Our worst fears confirmed! They are a horde of fanatical Deconstruction-ists; the world's well lost as far as they're concerned. But wait, a caveat from the editors of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bern-stein:

> It seems worth remembering, in looking back on these essays, that the tendencies in writing McCaffery is talking about under such headings as "language-centered" are as open to the entrapments of stylistic fixation as any other tendency in recent poetry. The rea-son we have shied away from any such labels in editing L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is that our project, if it can be summarized at all, has had to do with exploring the numerous ways meanings can be (& are) realized—revealed—produced in writing. In this context, the idea that writing could be stripped of reference is as troubling and confus-ing a view as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constituted world of "things." Rather, reference, like the body itself, is a given dimension of lan-guage, the value of which is to be found, in its various extents, in the poem (the world) before which we find ourselves at any moment. It is the power of reference (denotative, connotative, associational), not writers' refusal or fear of it, that threads these essays together. It is a renewed power that comes from the recognition that the (various)

measuring and composition of our references is the practice of our craft.

those who worry about being left only or chiefly with language may forget how inextricably it is tied to the rest of life. "Cross-reference" is presupposed by the Language poets.

III.

In the line of development which eventually made something like "language-centered writing" possible, exploration into "the nature of things" gradually became an exploration into human modes of response to the world. The status of metaphysics (how things are) was successively eclipsed by epistemology (how we know), philosophy of mind (how we think), philosophy of science (how we describe), and philosophy of language (how language, with which we describe and otherwise structure our experience in the world, works). Noting that people with different languages experience reality differently (the Whorfian hypothesis) there suddenly seemed to be multiple (language dependent) worlds. This insight, which began as a metaphor, came in some circles (e.g., Deconstructionist) to be taken quite literally.

Whatever the preferred variation on this theme, it is a relatively small step from the awareness that the language which structures reality is not a given, but clearly of our own making, to the idea that by changing our language we, to some extent, alter our form of life—if not our world. Here enters the utopian urge and the revolutionary language-centered poet who wishes to explore and transform established linguistic practices:

> If a larger common profile [of language-centered poets] is called for, I would choose the social project of writers committed to a transformation of society at a large-scale social level, of which writing can be an important arena in terms of its investigation of the nature of meaning, how objects are constituted by social values encoded in language, how reading and writing can partake of non-instrumental values and thus be utopian formations.
>
> (Charles Bernstein, *The Difficulties,* Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 1982, p. 29)

And more specifically:

> Meanwhile, the social forces hold sway in all the rules for the "clear" and "orderly" functioning of language and Caesar himself is the patron of our grammar books. Experience dutifully translated into these "most accessible" codes loses its aura and is reduced to the digestible contents which these rules alone can generate. . . . Any limits put on language proscribe the limits of what will be experienced, and, as Wittgenstein remarks, the world can easily be reduced to only the straight rows of the avenues of the industrial district, with no place for the crooked winding streets of the old city. "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life."—think of that first 'imagine' as the active word here. . . .—language control = thought control = reality control: it must be "decentered," "community controlled," taken out of the *service* of the capitalist project.
>
> (Charles Bernstein, *LB,* pp. 139–140)

Metaphysics has become aesthetics has become politics and if the "subject" is not really dead as McCaffery has claimed, the ego-centric "voice" —that privileged organ of authority—is.

For the Language poet it is an insidious archaism to believe (in) the "canonized" author; what is important is a community of participants— readers as well as writers—constructing and enacting a shared form of life: literature as initiation into possible worlds. The text in this view, must draw us into an imaginative and thoughtful responsibility to the language (community) as a whole.

This Marxist utopian* vision of language as a kind of "pure presence" decontaminating a society where everything including the word has become a commodity, where we speak without irony of the "literary market place," results in some off-putting "tracts." But it also generates interesting forms of play. In Winnicott's view, play—as opposed to fantasy which is essentially passive and confined to the mind—always involves the manipulation of things (in this case, language) in the real (shared) world: "playing is an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living." The activity of play

*Not all "language-centered" writers are Marxists or would consider themselves utopians, but the major theoretical force is anti-bourgeois.

springs from the impulse to negotiate, *but not close,* the gap between world and psyche. To close the gap would be a collapse into solipsism, and true play—therapeutic play—involves delight and surprise and risk just because it is *not* solipsistic; it is an engagement of self with the otherness of the world where a mutual transformation of meta-physickal consequence may occur. Utopians of any sort want to *enact* the futuristic structures of their imagination in order to create instructive and therapeutic models. Christopher Dewdney's "Fractal Diffusion" is a good example of this:

> In this article I am going to reify a progressive syllabic/letter transposition in units of ten. Starting with the letter A and working through the alphabet I will replavece eavech letter with ave syllaveble normavelly starting with the paverticulaver letter in question. The effects will be cumulavetive, the system is avepplied aves it works its wavey through the avelphavebutet. One quickly avercertaveins the import of the text, the exponentiavel growth ravete of membuter syllavebutles increaveses the word length, the morphemic laveg & consequent confusion slows the lexemic inertiave. . . . Avet this point only fivet lettetrs havevet undioetrgonet travensposition, yett thet oblitetravetion ofar scoaven-avediojustmetnt is avelmost coomplettet. . . . Six lettetrs into thet avelphavebutett, mavenifaretstavetion petrfaretcotetdiofarlowetr ofar farondiouet—ave faraver/farettcohetdio cooncolusion.

(*LB,* p. 109)

The high academic tone of the first sentence—certainly not to be mistaken for anyone's voice—becomes a retroactive parody by the time we have read the second sentence, so we are already twice removed from the ego of the author and accelerating toward a semantic vanishing point. Though that's happening on one level, we are not going to disappear along with all sense. What is also occurring is a figure/ground shift—lexical units, normally mere background props, are taking their place in the foreground in a kind of revolt of the peons. A new class arises with vulgar cheerfulness—foreign infiltrators and domestic upstarts alike. That is, we associate the process unfolding in the text with other (like) processes, this being a form of reference which creates a semantic field of a different sort.

The text is littered with too many letters and it's amusing and challeng-

ing, like a puzzle, and frightening and frustrating, like a degenerative disease of the eye or an aphasic stutter filling our minds with excess phonemes that resist cohering into words. Resistance is of course central to art, the medium asserting its substance and limitations, always refusing to become fully transparent. It is those who crave a transparent language who are inadvertently calling for the death of literature. The vision of transparency is the neo-Platonist one of unmediated presence, or the geometric one of the shortest distance between two points—getting to the point fast and without detour; in other words, the end of exploration and edification, the death, as Harold Bloom would put it ("after Freud"), of eros.

The spotty opacity of Dewdney's piece has distinct textures and patterns which have simply moved forward blocking our view of other things, effecting a sensual return to the threshold of literacy when all those letters bunched together in sinister gangs, or adorned the page like an exotic filigree, or both—the simultaneous resistance and seduction of the medium. Only now we reel backwards in "Fractal Diffusion" with growing alarm and glee as in a jerky silent film with increasingly scrambled subtitles in which a particularly virulent form of pig Latin threatens to obliterate our protagonist, the pretentious academic mode.

IV.

Play is immensely exciting. . . . The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself. . . .

(Winnicott, *Playing and Reality,* p. 47)

Some Language poets trace their roots back to ancient charm songs. This is volatile stuff—concentrated substance impacted with powerful effect. Attempts to perceive (and conceive) language anew alongside the preoccupation with therapeutic (revolutionary) transformation have engendered interests reminiscent of the excitement over primitive art objects in the early part of the century: "Picasso . . . felt their magic charge. This was what painting was 'all about'—not a mirror held up to nature but a talisman for changing life." (Calvin Tomkins, *The New Yorker,* October

29, 1984, p. 118) P. Inman's work has a talismanic quality that is nouveau Anglo-Saxon:

> thru drees, load dickening, keith
> all occliffed, plinther, intos thaggle, instance
> ilm deodr, mudxeast, paean ximv,'s
> another handsome attack, gline leverage, bsidb,
> tuned full simple
>
> *(Ocker)*

A reader might discount these lines as "nonsense" verse—*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves* without the cozy cradle of iambs and *abab* end rhymes. What it closely resembles* is the texture of Old English as in these lines from *Beowulf*:

> Fyrst forth gewat; flota waes on ythum,
> bat under beorge. Beornas gearwe
> on stefn stigon, streamas wundon,
> sund with sande;

Inman's pseudo-neologisms form a kind of phonic etymological thicket full of fleshy tuberous roots, and musk of centuries of linguistic compost —a synesthetic evocation of the dense and continuous presence our lan- guage both embodies and presupposes. But wouldn't it be just as well, if not better, to go back to the authentic goods—*Beowulf* itself or Chaucer, also represented by proxy in *Ocker*—instead of settling for an imitation? Of course one should, and Inman's work encourages just that; but it is an experience entirely different from that of "thru drees, load dickening, keith" which, because we are relatively unconcerned with decoding, frees us to play with the rich and lean, nubby and wiry syllables and letters.

Inman reacquaints us with a full-blown sensual apprehension of lan- guage—a luxury we can't or don't permit ourselves when semantics predominates. We, the inventors of the mind-body problem, have tended to give language over to "mind" as incorporeal reflector of essences. We tend, that is, to lose touch. The interspersing of recognizable words and

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*With the exception of the 3rd and 5th words in the 3rd line, since *x* usually occurs in words with Greek roots.

phrases in Inman's poem ("another handsome attack," "tuned full sim- ple") emphasizes this. Though a good deal of the heightened attention to phonics carries over, there is also an undeniable flattening of affect when we come upon this "ordinary" language. It is clear that the word, in so far as it is a working part of a language, can never be totally object; can never be fully isolated and magnified, as under a microscope, laying bare its cellular structure. It is too kinetically charged with its role in linguistic process. And that role entails a level of abstraction. This is, in ordinary usage, as it should be, for our language embodies not only the rich fiber of its textures but "all the distinctions men (sic) have found worth draw- ing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations" (J. L. Austin). But we must not forget that the words *text* and *texture* are from the same Latin root—*texere*, to weave. It is Inman's pleasure to explore the warp and woof of the fabric of our linguistic intuitions with all the meticulous humor words such as *warp* and *woof* evoke. Here the substantiating quality of the talisman, if nothing else, transforms our perceptions.

Though the preoccupation in *Ocker* is phonic, each poem is carefully placed, generally off center, on the page. Inman explores the placement of the poem further in other work as an oblique "slice" into the space that surrounds it, much as minimalist sculptors have done with their "gratui- tous" beams and blocks. There is, no doubt, a connection between current experiments with literary minimalism and the work of the '70s in the visual arts, but the more immediate debt of poets like Inman and James Sherry in *Converses* is to the Concrete movement of the '60s which radi- cally redefined the field of the poem, diminishing semantic impact in favor of visual and sound effects.

It has been argued that Concrete poetry is more an exercise in jumping disciplines (into the graphic arts and music) than an opening up of new literary genres—that much of it, in fact, abandons linguistic process. Charles Bernstein mentions in passing ("The Dollar Value of Poetry" *LB*, p. 139) that " 'concretist' tendencies" do not produce the radical untran- slatable ("non-commoditizable") effects Language poets are after since they result in what is "no longer so much writing as works of visual art." This raises an interesting question: to what extent do the radical experi- ments in Concrete and Language poetries continue to explore (from the audience's point of view) the experience of reading? In the well-known Concrete poem by Ronald Johnson—

eyeleveleye

the impact (apart from the fact that it is a palindrome) is dependent upon the meanings of the words, and even the syntax (the humor in speaking of an eye-level eye, for instance). There is no doubt that we are reading this poem (despite its probable untranslatability) according to the generally accepted rules of what it means in our culture "to read." The radical nature of the experience has to do with the self-contained and self-reflexive nature of the words compressed into a "neo-morpheme" and the implicit comment on the connection between eyes and words in the reading process itself—"eyeleveleye" being read at eye level.

If anything, the sense in which we can be said to be *reading* a good many of the Language poets is much more problematic. With Inman's work we are forced to invent (and then examine the implications of) an "as if these were real words" response (i.e., a form of play-reading), with the *trompe-l'oeil* quality of the poems returning us (as it does in the visual arts) to an appreciation of the medium. James Sherry, like Inman, has chosen to explore linguistic process in a poetic field which suppresses conventional semantics through a dramatic restructuring of syntax and punctuation, though the title of his book, *Converses,* provides an Empsonian field of levels of ambiguity. "*Converses*"—discusses, reverses, against verses, with verses, fraudulent verses: one could go back through the archaic to the obsolete when *converse,* like *intercourse,* meant both to discuss and to have sexual relations. But where does all this get us with the poem quoted earlier or others with similarly disorienting graphics? The title invites us from the outset to play—to make choices, to be conscious of having to make choices: Which, if any, of the above senses of "converses" applies? This is a game in which we have all been well trained. What we are not prepared for are the other kinds of choices poems like these demand. Just how are we to read such work? Sherry gives us hints, as in "Leveller":

| Methods | , | of determining |
| structure | , | from motion |

From the motion of the somewhat daunted and roving eye, looking for instructions on how to proceed, confronted with strong vertical and horizontal planes and a strange Maginot Line of periods, comes a sense, if not of confusion, of alternatives:

Roof	.	and walls
you haste to	.	as centuries
too steroid	.	are separated
language one of	.	by commas
the languages	.	the periods
grown lettuce	.	that lie
closer by franchise	.	into themselves
family letters	.	are broken—
white tee shirts	.	read vertical
on the bus	.	and soon saroong
many daughters	.	what
two orders	.	does
hard words	.	such
like this	.	form
and this	.	do?

("Chez Chink")

With its restorative and generative strangeness poetry saves language from the deadening effects of habitual usage. At least since written English became standardized and the calming effects of "easy reading" widespread, we have needed impossible metaphors, high jinks on the page, to startle us awake. That's one view. Another is that we should be grateful we are spared the necessity of Chaucer's harried prayer for understanding at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*—"And for ther is so great diversite/ In English and in writyng of oure tonge,/ So prey I God that non myswrite the[e]." What he is afraid of is being "mysred." The uniformity which Wittgenstein sees as characteristic of language was a hard-won accomplishment among English-speaking peoples. Why forego it now?

From a political standpoint the critical question becomes: Who determines "correct" usage?, and the answer for the Language poet is the power elite. This hard-won uniformity is thought to seduce readers with the vocabulary and rhythms of a power they neither choose nor share. (Standard English is the opiate of the masses.) The issue of choice is central —the development of the highly conscious, playful reader.

In beginning to read "Chez Chink," as is our habit from left to right, we may be tempted generously to overlook that "misplaced" period in our relief at spotting the perfectly acceptable conjunction, "Roof and walls." But that really isn't how it's written on the page (I have myswrit

the[e]), and anyhow things irremediably deteriorate on the horizontal axis from that point on. The two vertical columns are in fact separated by the periods "as centuries/ are separated." Is this how it should go?: "read vertical." Parts of the poem encourage this—"What/ does/ such/ form/ do?" Others don't. If we start at "Roof" and move downward like a knight on a chess board, we have a promising poem to go with the title, "Chez Chink." But what about the rest, what about this strong mispunctuating, those militant periods? And all that disturbingly disjunctive language on the left-hand side? It seems the gentle reader is obsolete. Here is Wittgenstein:

> There are *countless* kinds . . . of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.) Here the term "language-*game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking** of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.
>
> (*Philosophical Investigations* 23)

It is an acute awareness that certain language games become obsolete, but most assuredly not forgotten, which forms the consciousness of any literary avant garde. The historical amnesia we are generally so prone to can desert us when we most need it; when we have, for instance, played the role of gentle reader, on whose habits obsolete language games depend, to the point of stupor. The bulk of fashionable journal poetry sadly attests to this. With "Chez Chink" and other poems in *Converses,* James Sherry is asking us to play "active reader" in a language game which, though built on familiar vocabularies, presupposes a developing "form of life" in which readers, like writers, make substantial critical choices determining the quality and meaning of their reading. The political stance in this is obvious, but it is not exclusively Marxist. One can see it from the perspective of the early humanists (and Enlightenment liberals) who envisioned the "liberal" arts as training in the exercise of the free human wills which had usurped from their Medieval God the power to shape their own

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*I take this to mean "speech act" which includes writing.

world. This had largely to do with real estate and trade and the push and pull and grind of technology. These days we are concerned with the more subtle mechanics of language. In light of the Whorfian hypothesis, it appears that to refrain from exercising our creative powers with respect to language is to let its built-in habits determine the boundaries of our lives. What liberates us from habit is the jarring of consciousness that makes choice possible, our own manipulation of things—play.

So, we return to "Chez Chink." Perhaps we are "closer by franchise"; that is, as enfranchised readers we can investigate the battery of commas and periods that have separated centuries, and how historical continuities are rearranged according to current usages—how all our structures have chinks. "Chez Chink" is the structure that is made of chinks, if that is possible. Is "Chez Chink" possible? Certainly it is possible. Even now we are reading it: "the periods/ that lie/ into themselves/   are broken," and/ or "the languages   .   / the periods   .   / grown lettuce   .   / that lie   .   / closer by franchise." What "grown lettuce" (or "lie") refers to in these readings is again something we can play with by old rules: Is "lettuce" slang for paper money, slant homonym for "letters" or "let us" . . . ? But the experience of traversing long horizontal stretches between words, stumbling each time on a displaced period like an unconnected spigot in a desert—this is of a different order. And yet this passage through word fragments and space and oddly punctuated time is not entirely unfamiliar. It is reminiscent of the spatial and temporal discontinuities in some of the more abbreviated Beckett word plays; only in this case we are the characters struggling with (and savoring too) "hard words/ like this/ and this." Or is it "hard words   .   / such/ like this   . / form/ and this   .   / do?" As John Cage says, "We forget that we must always return to zero in order to pass from one word to the next."

V.

Bruce Andrews' *Praxis* (quoted in the first section of this article), Charles Bernstein's *Resistance,* and Douglàs Messerli's *Some Distance* are examples of more traditional poetry (certainly graphically), the non-symbolist, "Indeterminist" one that Marjorie Perloff has charted from Rimbaud's *Illuminations* to the work of John Cage in her book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy.* The lean elegance we have come to expect of poetry lodged between

ample margins remains; we read familiar words in the usual fashion—left-right, zigzag down the page—and we respond primarily to the meanings of words rather than to their textures or the puzzle of their unorthodox alignments. Here, however, the familiar ends. All of this work is syntactically odd because these poets are playing with semantic units and relations. When we realize that the units (words, phrases, lines) quite often don't coalesce in a logical manner, we are thrown back on more intuitive responses which depend on the sensual properties of the language. So this poetry, like Inman's and Sherry's, though not to the same degree, brings us close to the nap of the language.

Andrews picks his words and phrases with the taste of a discerning collector. The linguistic units in *Praxis* are not flashy specimens but the choices of a refined and trusting sensibility—confident enough in the skills of his readers to dispense with any but the most minimal shaping:

> the sound of galloping could be simulated
> ourselves
> to cool their ardor
> rummage
> *doubt*
> synonymous with the caution in which it is
> supposed to reside
> speaks of a hill near by
> as idle spectators
> tattered boners
> alluding to candlesticks
> as palaver
> the adjoining
> stiff
> divides prayers
> and has defences
> is close to this
> turrets

These delightful snippets of language enjoy a rather tenuous meeting. Lined up on the page, they are individually so reticent and self-contained that one can imagine their having been gathered from a variety of sources. What sort of semantic field does their conjunction create?

We are given few strong indicators about how or whether to form

syntactic clusters in *Praxis*. Beginning with the first page of the handsome Tuumba volume—"pizzicatos of glass/ moratorium/ to home/ what will have been/ fortune/ fortunate . . ."—it is as though one has stepped into the Heraclitean stream full force (it must be Spring). It moves on with or without us, both changing and the same; and we as readers are in *praxis* —that sober Marxist concept of play—identifying clusters that seem to cohere, trying out alignments and realignments, letting go: "doubt/ synonymous with the caution in which it is/ supposed to reside" seems clear and might relate to "the sound of galloping could be simulated." But who or what "speaks of a hill near by?" There is no "subject" in the environs to which we can attach this verb phrase. Words drift by like flotsam: "ourselves," "to cool their ardor," "rummage" (which we note is a splendid word). "the adjoining/ stiff" can be read as a semantic unit (noun and modifier) though this is not a necessary conjunction. So we have the scene, one of flux, words passing by, occasional minor falls—"ourselves," "rummage," "turrets"; some intriguing vortices—"tattered boners/ alluding to candlesticks" ("palaver" of those "idle spectators"?). Curiously, the effect of *Praxis* is most refreshing when you let it wash over you, beginning to end, again and again—preferably reading aloud, allowing the semantic patterns to shift "on their own." They will do this because the surface pleasure, the surface tension, in Andrews' arrangement is strong enough to entice the brain into its specialty—making connections. More meticulous analysis, as above, stops the flow and releases a kind of "extract of Ashbery," albeit at a farther reach of indeterminacy and precisely located in the word—without the meditative elaborations of Ashbery's syntax.

In *Resistance* Charles Bernstein has adopted a consciously literary mode by combining Indeterminist strategies with what his editor calls "a perverse formalism." There is the return of the line, beginning with capital letters, and even the stanza; there are regular metrics and internal rhymes. The only problem is that the sense is distinctly skewed, as in these lines from "Playing With a Full Deck":

> What chainlink beckons, held in
> Hand, for pleading bleeds the
> Finer auger's talon. Redress
> Without defame, insists what
> Losses snare, here to where

Determine favors show. Gleam of
Your unbridling, diffused arc's
Indifferent spar—the slater
Letters oak-lined portion, flagrant
Sorrow end up, calling. What
Wills this show, for make believe
Or stammer, pockets blast at
Infamy's store: These cratered
Sorrows launch out, serenade
To pare the suction sooner
Stung; Whose will not bend nor
Ape like furrows, arched
Complacency's wirey mold.

The strong iambics, with some internal pentameter—"What/ Wills this show, for make believe/ Or stammer"; the adjectival drama—"Finer auger's talon," "indifferent spar," "flagrant Sorrow"; and the archaic tone give this a pseudo-Shakespearian surface (or Hart Crane via Stein and the Dadaists?). How many in the audience would notice if it were slipped into *Hamlet*, or *Macbeth*, or *Othello*? This is a kind of sound poetry akin to Inman's "Old English" and perhaps even to Zukofsky's "Catullus LI":

> *Ille mi par esse deo videtur*
> He'll hie me, par *is* he? the God divide her,
> he'll hie, see fastest, superior deity . . .

Resistance is full of the sounds of earlier poetry. But are not these the forms that carried the spirit of the capitalist project in the name of high culture? Probably Bernstein would see it that way. So this resistance has to do with a refusal to fulfill the orders and expectations dictated by the form. And there are other kinds of resistance—the flagrantly opaque medium: the non-linear line; and the images like *faux marbre*. The closer the inspection, the more "auger's talon," "diffused arc's Indifferent spar," and "cratered Sorrows" appear to be rhetorical flourishes. The pleasure, not unprecedentedly, is in the perversion, which, in this case, is in the (de)formalism.

The epigraph to Douglas Messerli's *Some Distance* is a quotation from Roland Barthes: "I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me." Barthes's emphasis on the precarious sensuality of language, the vulnerability of the language user (writer or reader) as lover, is of a

piece with Douglas Messerli's quest for a fragile balance between the "nodal radiance" of images and the blind spots caused by syntactic disjunctions:

> a figure is a fist, there she sits
> into conspicuous to rope up a threshold of course
> one does not put one's hat at even into his pocket
> the jaguar under the house (any house
> driftwood piling like possessions of what
> surprise through sharp apricot teeth,
> a nice kettle of fish on a friendly beach.
> the back is a cucumber.
> the cat enjoys its prerogatives.

> ("That Night")

The first line, "a figure is a fist, there she sits," is a pleasingly symmetrical construction (three beats, and three; "fist" balanced by "sits") presenting a vivid image later qualified by second thoughts: Gertrude Stein came to mind, but that is gratuitously specific; it could be any woman with a stolid demeanor, perhaps cross-legged (that would not be Stein), self-contained, hostile(?). In the second line, interference begins—grammatical static or a strobe effect, depending on whether we're thinking in terms of sound or sight. At any rate, our sense of "mastery" is already slipping. Line three, despite the inexplicable appearance of "at even" is again imagistically clear, but by now there is a cumulative incoherence which is further developed with the "jaguar under the house (any house." But at the mention of "driftwood" that house gains the possibility of being one of those beach structures on stilts (under which cars are sometimes parked), and then, after the mention of teeth, which imply nothing about place beyond the mouth, there is "a friendly beach" and a "back" and a "cat" (perhaps the jaguar) which could easily fit into the scene, "That Night," by the ocean.

No, the air of uncertainty is too great to settle into this interpretation —perhaps more a product of our rationalist conservatism desiring tidy closure than clear indicators in the poem. That "fist," for instance, may not belong to "there she sits" after all. We might see it, in a deft sleight of mind, reappear in the play on "one does not put one's hands in one's pockets" in the third line; or, after a double-take on "a nice kettle of fish"

—which as we know is not so fine as all that, and begins to sound more like a figure of speech than dinner by the sea—the fragile "scene" we've constructed seems to be dissolving, despite the cozy realism of the cat (perhaps not a jaguar) enjoying its prerogatives. The point is, though, that the possibility was there: of a montage which "captured" the atmosphere, even the specifics of "That Night"; a glimpse of coherence which for us nominalists might be our closest equivalent to the Romantic "glimpse of eternity," close enough to induce a sense of poignancy and longing; seduction and wound, inextricable. This language, like the lover, promises and then withdraws (is coyly playful) but not to the point of mitigating our desire.

VI.

. . . there remains the necessity to pay attention to the ability to deal with the desire for language, and by this I mean paying attention to art and literature, and, in even more poignant fashion, to the art and literature of our time, which remain alone, in our world of technological rationality, to impel us not toward the absolute but toward a quest for a little more truth, an impossible truth, concerning the meaning of speech, concerning our condition as speaking beings. That, after all, is in my opinion the fundamental lesson taught us by Roman Jakobson, who reached one of the high points of language learning in this century by never losing sight of Russian futurism's scorching odyssey through a revolution that ended up strangling it.

(Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. ix)

In our condition as speaking beings—powerful, vulnerable; enlightened, confused; connected, alone—we negotiate a fine line, a dotted line, between the healthy anonymity of convention and the need for individuation. Much of literature with its staunch, "well made" equilibrium fails to disclose the hazards of this feat. The "desire for language" is not only to create a presence (words) in the shadow of absence (the remoteness of the other) but to propel one's self toward that elusive other: "Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words." (Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*)

Language informs the emergence (the emergency) of selves deposited in a world of irremediable distances and some, relatively few for each of us, that can be spanned. It is inextricably tied to community but it is also in many of its most potent aspects, deeply personal.

It is this dimension of language that game analogies with their emphasis on rule-governed behavior, to the exclusion of individual motivations and energies, seem to miss. Wittgenstein does not include anything like Winnicott's sense of the individual's need for play among his "forms of life" (though his writing is always a form of play), nor does he have much tolerance for the ambiguities and paradoxes of the condition of the "speaking being." He uneasily relegates poetry and paradox to a split-off realm of the "mystical"—to silence. All the poets discussed so far utilize public aspects of language, avoiding, even abhorring any tie to personality, attempting to remove their work from "expressionist" strategies. They are formalist (perverse or not), minimalist, constructivist. There is no "voice." There are instead the resonances and valences language carries with it even as a driverless vehicle. The limits these poets put on their projects are no reason to dismiss them anymore than we dismiss Chomsky for ignoring the affective component of language. It is, however, reason to dismiss any claims for this being the only legitimate form poetry can take in a socially enlightened world—claims made with annoying frequency in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. There are, disclaimers notwithstanding, some heavily dogmatic tendencies here. Dogma, which condemns plurality, must be distinguished from clarity of purpose. Personal aspects of language will always need to be explored.

. . .

> introduction as class i see words between lines   on sign
> Alex Hladky is dead, burial, movement leader as white as
> could be as seen I words, sojourn PERIO
> the following is ALL SEEN AS WORDS BEFORE i
> write mother IT DOWN IN THE BOOK   AS CLASS
> the I Ching THROW said 16 the number Enthusiasm
> S U I C ₁in a carD E following the change 17 on
> Alex Hladky's death late fall 1982   I was promised
> to him just a little bit everyone all
> otherwise the piece as usual was following orders en
> titled BY MYSELF IN SEEN WORDS

the number
sixteen sentences seen this summer 82^{THE SAME}
AS ABOVE period

(Hannah Weiner, *Sixteen*)

In Hannah Weiner's work the "I" as word-besieged persona is an organizing presence with all the persistent preoccupations that identify a self. But that "self" is filtered, focused, and dispersed through language, rather than the other way around—"MYSELF IN SEEN WORDS." Weiner moves between "universality" and idiosyncracy, opacity and "personal" disclosure, in a sort of steady state of disequilibrium which achieves an odd balance but never loses the palpable threat of disintegrating into private language. In its hair's breadth avoidance of this catastrophe, it generates an exciting tension.

Weiner, who bills herself as a "clairvoyant" writer, is a non-theoretical "naive deconstructionist," made in the U.S.A., who literally sees the world as text. That is, she sees pieces of language hovering in the air, lying on tables, plastered to people's foreheads (including her own), "between lines," at a 45° angle to a pants cuff. . . . Occasionally the letters are illuminated (as in ancient manuscripts), more often they appear as if typewritten. Her dreams sometimes have subtitles. The "self" in *Sixteen* and *Spoke* is the diarist who records the day's word appearances as they come, unbidden, often at inconvenient moments, fast and thick as she struggles to take them down, "following orders," at a necessarily manic pace. The results are fragmented, quirkily ungrammatical, full of misspellings, reflecting the syntactic violence of an onslaught. The "I"—part person, part language construct, unsure where either of these begin or end, is a pathetic, tragic, comic figure at the mercy of the often cranky (accusatory "STUPID"'s are frequent) foibles of WORDS.

JULY 21 TUES

WHAT IS THE STYLE PREVALENT IN OUR OWN AGE CLASSICAL

I dont mind the name calling me up again but he wont do

it if I only
        TRANSPARENCE

wait   only he is retired for the summer if its only
                                        SENTENCE
somename is back very happily in her OWN subject
preschool children are INHIBITED by small town occurances

first somename would talk be happily SUNDAY in it READING IS
OVER some Indians are in it with it the STAYED ON   with it

the land REVOLUTION sis I stayed with the
                                EMPORIUM
style CONFLICT IN THE MAY OVER WHICH READING
                                        CANCELLED
I must the May poetry project style group in it   NO ONE

UNDERSTANDS ME
                READING
SIMPLY OR THE WOMAN FAST HAS IT   UNEMOTIONAL   WHAT IF

THE STRIKE IS OVER   WRITE darling A SMALL POSTCARD   SEPT

ARRIVES TO BE CERTAIN I MUST CALL HIM WEDNESDAY BACK   BUT

DONT MEET THURSDAY NIGHT Im over fifty
                                AND DONT BECAUSE I
sis kill the rura business problem name on the phone

LET HIM KNOW ME in it PROBLEM SKIP THE NAME PAGE
                                                (*Spoke*, p. 31)

The "voice" in *Spoke* addressing itself primarily to "sis" and the Language poets, talking about "Aunt Reka" and "mother" and "Grandmother," Indians, revolution, weight problems, periods (punctuation and menstruation), cancer, strokes, death, philosophy, swimming, hormones, social security . . . that voice is lost ("NO ONE UNDERSTANDS ME") and found ("LET HIM KNOW ME") in language, as all voices are but generally with fewer gaps and fissures showing. No paradoxes are resolved here.

Weiner's stance is an interesting variation on the myth of the Muse— that poetry, being greater than a mere mortal's sensibility can encompass, must have an outside source. The clairvoyance, or "clear seeing," distinguishes her from Muse-fed poets of the past whose inspirations generally came by (inner) ear. The Language poets all, in a way, update this myth. Language being a shared (community) enterprise is much larger, richer,

more complex, less centered than the ego of any individual writer. Language users are participants, not owners. (Should a theoretically consistent Language poet renounce copyrights?) We need not personify the outside source as "Muse"—just another ego to contend with; instead we can amuse ourselves with (and explore) found language—whether it be overheard speech, extracts from texts and media, or words floating unaccountably in air. Hannah Weiner, in projecting the words she uses "out there," is in addition to exploiting her highly visual orientation, dissociating her self as writer from the Romantic, ego-centric tradition of the charismatic artist, dispenser of the divine gift. The "self," as writer, lacks that kind of energy; the energy source is in the language which informs, and overwhelms, but does not entirely obliterate the "I."

. . .

> *. . . our only chance to avoid being neither master nor slave of meaning lies in our ability to insure our mastery of it (through technique or knowledge) as well as our passage through it (through play or practice). In a word, jouissance.*

(Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language,* p. x)

Tina Darragh's work is a linguistic *jouissance* attempting to balance technique and knowledge with play and practice. She is a procedural poet who sees the act of writing a poem as a form of research. The research "required" by her carefully formulated strategies is a form of play in itself. Here she explains her approach in *on the corner to off the corner* (Sun & Moon Press):

> Francis Ponge's *Soap* introduced me to "procedural writing." He had: taken what was at hand, let it refer to itself and then tracked the process as it would go. So I: take what is at hand (the dictionary), pick a page at random, use the key words heading the page as "directions", find a pattern and/or flow of the words and write it down, trying to retain as much of the procedure as possible in the prose. . . . what interests me is the coincidence and juxtaposition of the words on the page in their natural formation (alphabetical order). In reference to each other, they have a story of their own.

("Procedure," *LB,* p. 107)

Pi in the Skye is "investigative" poetry reminiscent of Ed Sanders' long poem by that name (*Investigative Poetry,* City Lights Books). After distinguishing between two uses of the word "cliche"—*construction*; and *sound,* from its origin during the Industrial Revolution in the noise of the machinery—Darragh poses her question/hypothesis this way:

> cliche as a sound
> is the inner life of a person's voice
>
> that surfaces
> one way or another
>
> in our industrial age
>
> in thinking
> about cliche as sound
>   a question
> whether these sound lines
> could be traced
> to a particular geographic location
> that PLACE
> being "home" for a person's voice . . .
>
> taking a clue from science
> surveyors find the depth of various points
> by taking soundings

(pp. 2–3)

To answer her question, Darragh does in fact take "soundings" from the work of P. Inman (her husband) and guesses that the "home" for his voice, "where soft vowels/ appear with hard consonant blends," might be the Isle of Skye. There follows a wonderful "Skye glossary list":

step two: Skye glossary list

abhainn	barnacle	dunscaith
firking	ord	corrie
garboard	wrack	stern
strakes	shelduck	tube
bobbins	gruagach	cnoc
allt	shoal	tupping

of
lsay
sisal
graipe
stern
fairleads
ludag
plunk

lythe
dugongs
bothy
river
pith
bracken
muirburn
skart

gorse
bush
cleg
ma gannets
crotal
braces
creel
corncrake

kestrel
croft

the results:

step three: In taking 70 examples from *A Linguistic Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland* including liquids, dentals, sibilants, nasals, spirants, diphtongs (sic) and occlusives found on Skye, I found that P's work contained but one example of sounds found there.

This is an investigation of voice as something quite distinct from the propulsive will which is seen by Language poets to bully the reader into the confines of a privileged world order. The "I" has not abdicated its power to shape the objects of inquiry (of caring), but it is clear that this is only one of many possible ways to make meaning. Darragh's poem is, like all of us, subject to the specificity and "luck" of placement in space and time. That awareness rescues the poem's ending from sentimentality:

& what I hadn't understood before
is that a rainbow exists
more as a direction than a location
& that I must be standing at a certain angle—
the anti-solar point—
in order to see it
& that conditions exist for seeing some sort of rainbow
24 hours a day
for example—last week
we got back a roll of film
with pictures of P. & D. building blocks
& in one shot
there is a small arc of light

to the right of their building
& I'm not sure exactly
what to call it
or how it happened
but I do feel extremely lucky
to have been looking there
from the right angle
to that place
at that time

This could be called "I"-centric writing in order to distinguish it from ego-centrism. The "I" here has speech rhythms and consistency of voice without intimations of a psychic substrate we need plumb in order to grasp the full meaning of the poem. It is "I" as structuring agent at play—both procedural model and carrier of personal motivations and values. What is most distinct about the project of this poem is its degree of disclosure, including an explanation of the procedure which produces it. There is the warmth (missing from even the most skillful vivisections of the other poets under review) of the personal in language; but the privileged placement, status, and access of the ego-centric authoritative voice is entirely absent.

The difference between *Pi in the Skye* and, say, *Praxis* is similar to the difference between the work of a naturalist, whose investigative forays retain structures of ordinary experience, and that of the laboratory scientist, whose examination of highly technical questions is divorced from the world outside the laboratory. The elegance of the Watson-Crick DNA model, and of diagrams of alpha waves and protons, delights us and draws us closer to the arcane vocabulary of science; but, as lay persons, until we see connections with the systems we are aware of experiencing in our daily lives (genetics, sleep patterns, electricity) we do not feel more competent or more empowered in our world. *Praxis* is a beautiful experimental model of shifting semantic patterns among elegantly placed linguistic units, demonstrating how playful and inventive the mind can be when presented with comparatively minimal cues. It is a reminder that we are always interpreting.

In dramatically presenting us with unaccustomed choices, *Praxis*, like *Converses*, demands a more active collaboration with the writer than *Pi in the Skye* or *Spoke*. This clearly extricates us from certain kinds of conventional response, but to what extent does it liberate us from habits of

association which are prone to take over when logic fails? If our role in the collaboration is to fill in the blanks with free associations, there is a danger that we are merely turning inward, rather than toward community and responsibility as language users. In the absence of an organizing consciousness to push against, an external point of view, such as Weiner and Darragh give us, what is there but the self as resource? This looks suspiciously like a shift from egocentric writer to egocentric reader. Does the world get lost after all? William Gass speaks compellingly of the "world within the word" but that word must be experienced as considerably larger than the self.

There is something unsettling too about the convoluted, hyperacademic prose of a good deal of the theoretical writing in *The L·A·N·G·U·A·G·E Book*. Studded with cacophonic jargon like "structuralized fetishism," "positionality," and "commoditization," it perpetuates bad habits traceable to Marx's nineteenth-century philosophical milieu while arguing for a contemporary reevaluation of style. Social preoccupations seem largely polemical and conspicuously devoid of interest in the audience (beyond other Language poets) which is presumably to be empowered by the "new syntax." There is much work to do on "praxis." Despite this, the daring ingenuity of language poetry* provides a powerful and much needed antidote to the ubiquity of the bland and innocuous in so-called "mainstream" literature, and may indeed help to "phisicke," as Nashe put it, our "faculties of seeing and hearing." As the sum total of persons sensitive to language rises, so does the general welfare, or so some of us believe. For this we need continually to reinvent the fine art of language play.

JOAN RETALLACK

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*This essay necessarily considers just a fraction of the writers who can be considered Language poets. For a better idea of their numbers and range see selections of their work included in *Paris Review* 86 (Winter 1982), *Ironwood* 20 (Fall, 1982), and *Sulfur* 8 (1983).