Edwin Morgan, delivered on 23 November 1989

Language, Poetry, and Language Poetry

I would like first of all to express my thanks to the University of Liverpool for inviting me to deliver the Kenneth Allott Lecture. As journalist, teacher, lecturer, editor, anthologist, and of course poet, Kenneth Allott made a notable contribution to the enjoyment and appreciation of modern poetry. His *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* was one of the most useful collections of its type ever to appear, and his masterly annotated edition of Matthew Arnold's poems extend that usefulness back into the nineteenth century. Arnold, indeed, as an early experimenter with free verse, can also be called a modern poet. I thought, in choosing my subject for this lecture, that some kind of investigation into the poetry of our own time would be as good a tribute to Allott as any, though I am bound to say that I am not at all sure whether he would have positive feelings about my particular choice of poets.

When Kenneth Allott died in 1973 he died at the very time when a new group or movement was emerging in American poetry, and it is this movement I want to talk about. 'Language poetry', or 'language writing' as it is sometimes called (because some of the poets also produce creative prose), began to appear in the early 1970s as part of a reaction to the feeling that the breakthrough against academic verse which had characterized the Fifties and Sixties — the New American Poetry as it was called, after Donald Allen's famous anthology of 1969, the work of Allen Ginsberg and the other Beats, of Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, of Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara — had itself in turn been absorbed by the academy, by the universities where so many poets taught or were sat at the feet of, by the proliferation of poetry workshops all over the country where bland free verse reports on personal experience calling themselves poems were pouring out and in effect marginalizing poetry as far as making any real impact on society was concerned. It is, in essence, an ancient and recurring situation: as one set of outsiders is tamed and institutionalized, another set of outsiders is required to shake the body politic and make people think again. And because the main complaint, in the early 1970s, was that poetry had become too bland, too unchallenging, the new movement was determinedly avant-garde and often difficult, not only difficult to understand but (what was worse) difficult to like. It roused huge opposition, not only from traditional or conservative writers and institutions but also from some poets who would normally be regarded as fairly avant-garde, like Robert Duncan. A writer in *The Nation* magazine (Stuart Klawans) said that reading Ron Silliman (one of the main 'language' poets) was like 'dragging your naked body through a bed

The Kenneth Allott Lectures. 5. Liverpool, Liverpool Classical Monthly: 1990

of hot coals and broken glass'. Words like 'ugly', 'unpleasant', and (most commonly) 'incomprehensible' were frequently used to describe the new works. Even the poet John Ashbery, one of the best of the poets outside the 'language' group, who is to some extent respected by them, will only say in their favour (in an interview in 1985): 'I like some of the Language Poets though I've no idea what their movement is all about.' So what is their movement all about?

As their title suggests, the 'language' poets want to foreground language at the expense of other components, including character, plot and argument. Among their ancestors they include Gertrude Stein and the Russian Futurists like Kruchonykh and Khlebnikov. I am not sure how much they have actually read of the Russian Futurists — I suspect not much — but the idea of a trans-rational language like the Futurists' *zaum*, which produced various sound-poetry effects, appealed to them, and the more it kept obvious meaning at bay the more they liked it. But it was Gertrude Stein they particularly admired; her works, whether in verse or in prose, do slide in and out of meaning, but she was one of the first modernists to call attention to the individual word. Unlike Joyce, who was fascinated by the etymologies and associations of words, Stein wanted the word itself, in as pure a state as possible. When she was lecturing once at the University of Chicago, a student asked her what was the meaning of her most famous line, 'rose is a rose is a rose', and she replied: 'Now listen. Can't you see that when the language was new — as it was with Chaucer and Homer — the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was really there. He could say "O moon", "O sea", "O love", and the moon and the sea and love were really there. And can't you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, he could call on those words and find they were just wornout literary words. The excitingness of pure being had withdrawn from them . . . Now you have all seen hundreds of poems about roses and you know in your bones that the rose is not there . . . Now I don't want to put too much emphasis on that line, because it's just one line in a longer poem. But I notice that you all know it; you make fun of it, but you know it. Now listen! I'm no fool. I know that in daily life we don't go around saying " . . . is a . . . is a . . . is a . . . " Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.' You can place along with that comment of Gertrude Stein, two quotations from the 'language' poets. A line in a poem by Rosmarie Waldrop says: 'Only language grows such grass-green grass.' And Douglas Messerli has an introductory statement in his collection of poems *River to Rivet: A Manifesto* (1984): 'I am more interested in the relationship of river to rivet than I am in the relationship of river to bridge.' Messerli wants to get away from the conventional, pictorial, 'natural' image of a river and a

bridge out there in the world, and he's drawn instead by the sound-and-spelling links between river and rivet: and even if you say that some distant image is called up, through an association between a large river and shipbuilding using rivets, still, the prime interest is linguistic.

But the difference between Stein and the 'language' poets is that they take her argument further away from the external world as we know it or say we know it. Let me give you an example, and I'll take a fairly extreme one, to make the point as clear as possible.

thoeisu
thoiea
akcorn woi cirtus locqvump
icgja
ovmwoflux
epaosieusl
~~cirtus locqvump~~
a nex macheisoa

That poem has no title, but it comes from a book by David Melnick published in 1975, one of the early blasts of the trumpet for the new movement. The book is called (and I shall spell the one word title before pronouncing it) *Pcoet*. The title suggests 'poet' but it can hardly be pronounced (is it possible to get from a p sound to a k sound without inserting some brief vowel?). What it seems to say is that here is a poet who is not quite a poet, or is a new kind of poet, namely a pcoet. There is a deliberate dashing of the expectations of conventional or lazy readers. The poem itself is characteristic of 'language' writing in that its obscurity is not able to be decoded after hard work, its difficulty is not like the difficulty of (say) John Donne's 'Air and Angels', which can be worked out, and even if ambiguities remain, they are themselves held within certain parameters that we can relate to. But there is no 'key' to David Melnick's poem. Each line does have suggestions of words, e.g. 'acorn' and 'citrus' which are both botanical, 'flux' and 'annex' which are not. And there are morphological suggestions of a foreign language like perhaps Greek, in endings such as -eisu, -iea, -ieusl, -eisoa. But again, nothing adds up. Finally, you have to leave the poem as it is. It resists, and yet at the same time challenges, the act of reading. Melnick has himself written briefly about it, in 'A Short Word on my Work', in the magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: 'I doubt that any statement will mediate between PCOET and its audience. There will be some who attend at once to its aesthetic and to that of other wordless poetries. The poems are made of what look like words and phrases but are not. I think these poems look like they *should* mean something more than other

wordless poems do. At the same time, you know that you can't begin to understand what they mean. What can such poems do for you? You are a spider strangling in your own web, suffocated by meaning. You ask to be freed by these poems from the intolerable burden of trying to understand.'

This defence, as Melnick recognizes, will not convince all his readers, but it's quite important in the wider context of 'language' poetry, and it is a fact that *PCOET* became a book often referred to, it did stick in the mind; as Gertrude Stein reminded her students, You may laugh at me but you all remember my 'rose is a rose is a rose'; in the same way, many in America are aware that they have among them not only poets but also pcoets. The point Melnick is making in his bizarre way is one that is general to the 'language' poets: they want to break down the very widespread belief that language must point not to itself but to the world; they regard it as false humanism that poems (and for that matter novels and short stories and plays) should hand us, as on a plate (and even Donne has a plate, ornate as it may be), pleasurable re-creations of recognizable characters doing things over time in recognizable situations and locales. Their argument has a social, economic and political dimension, and Marx is often quoted. It is one of several paradoxes attending the movement that such consciously avant-garde writers, producing works which are very often anti-meaningful in any ordinary use of the term, should be, as they are, left-wing radicals who aim to shake the American public back to essentials, to rouse them from a stupor of consumerism where the latest Gore Vidal or John Ashbery is sure to be lying on the coffee table, but the Ashbery is there not because it might be quite interestingly difficult but only because everyone knows that Ashbery is a soothing and relaxing read, like muzak. The 'language' writers are very articulate (garrulous, their enemies say) and they write much criticism as well as poetry. When they quote Marx, as they often do, they refer to fetishization: as long as literary works seem designed to give readers the glow of feeling that they actually *possess* the reality of what is referred to, that it has a value which has been transferred to them like an acquisition, then they will remain sheeplike, satisfied by an illusion of goods and possessions which confirm and reinforce but don't question or shock or help the world to evolve. Here is what Ron Silliman says in his book of critical essays, *The New Sentence* (1987): 'What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism", the illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the function of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality.' And he adds: 'Thus in language as well as printing technology, the rise of capitalism set the preconditions for the rise of the

novel . . . This dream of an art with no medium, of a signified with no signifiers, is inscribed entirely within the commodity fetish.'

These are all points which recur among the theorists of the 'language' movement, and they are points that do demand attention. When language, as they claim, is used mainly for 'expository, descriptive and narrative' purposes, it becomes dull and anaesthetized. When the signified is exalted above the signifier, readers are going to unwrap the parcel as quickly as they can, throw away the package, and devour what has become just another commodity. Therefore, Silliman would say, let us give them something that is all package, all signifier, something like a Rubik's cube with inbuilt flaws, which may be almost but never quite solved, and has nothing inside except its own works. And this will not be done in order to make them frustrated and angry and jumping up and down, though it may well have that effect; no, he says, he wants a new cooperation between writers and readers, he wants new, serious de-anaesthetized readers, who will gradually realize — re-realize, since it is an ancient thing — the innate powers of language, and in particular the power of language to call a new alternative world into being which is *not* the world of (in English and Irish terms) Ted Hughes's animals, or Philip Larkin's bedsits, or Seamus Heaney's bog people. These three poets would represent very well what the 'language' poets do *not* want. (English poets they approve of are few, but include Tom Raworth and Allen Fisher, and they also like the Scottish poet Thomas A. Clark. J. H. Prynne too would be on their wavelength. And I should add that one poet, poet and critic, who if she had lived would have found them sympathetic was Veronica Forrest-Thomson who died so tragically in her twenties in 1975: a link with myself in Glasgow where I used to know her and with you here in Liverpool, where she took her degree; her own poetry, and her critical book *Poetic Artifice*, were moving very much towards the 'language' poetry position.)

Going back to the idea of an alternative world which I mentioned, I would add that the 'language' poets are fond of rewriting Wittgenstein's much-quoted statement in the *Tractatus* that 'The world is everything that is the case.' Not so, they say; in fact the world is everything that is *not* the case. It remains to be discovered. It is potential rather than realized. It is like the sheet of paper in David Melnick's typewriter before he had found the word 'pcoet'. I have the feeling that Wittgenstein would have seen a way round this, perhaps observing that the 'language' poets are merely extending the list of 'cases'; even a pcoet is a case, or possibly a pcase, which would give Wittgenstein further thought.

Given the fact that the 'language' poets hold these quite difficult and formidable views, how have they gone about their job since the beginnings around 1970? They were determined to avoid, if they could, both the universities and the well-known publishers, and they

published in small presses many of which they set up ad hoc. They wrote voluminously in certain favoured magazines, again apart from the mainstream. They reviewed one another's books at great length, in minute detail, taking the obvious risk of being called cliquish; they *were* a clique, and that was that, that was how you started off. They gave readings, some of which by all accounts seem to have aroused much opposition as well as genuine interest. A reading might be more like a seminar, with the audience expected to take part by bombarding the poets with serious questions which would be seriously answered. Sometimes hands were to be raised, as in school, and the audience would be watched to see if some people never raised their hand, these being then warned that they were being 'colonized' by their neighbours who did speak. It was all quite strenuous, but some are on record as having found the meetings strangely liberating and full of social impact. The main group was in San Francisco, and this was soon followed by a group in New York; these have remained the two chief centres. They have now brought out scores of books of poetry and prose, many of them extremely attractive and well produced, though still from small presses. They have reached the stage where they can hardly escape having contacts with the establishment, being discussed in colleges, being made available to a larger public through anthologies (*In the American Tree*, ed. Ron Silliman, 1986, published by the National Poetry Foundation at the University of Maine, and *'Language' Poetries*, ed. Douglas Messerli, 1987, published by New Directions, a well established though avant-garde-friendly publisher in New York). Despite this higher profile and greater recognition, they do not feel that they have won the battles they set out to fight. They are still subject to attack or scorn. Those who think they know nonsense as soon as they see it are not likely to be persuaded. For all that, it will be interesting to see how far their poems infiltrate standard anthologies, whether some poems become favourites with a general public, whether in the end those works will not change the course of American poetry so much as remain as large awkward facts in the background, not unlike the works of the Russian Futurists who were despised for many years but are now again in favour and much studied. In recent magazines, one or two people have even used the term 'post-language poetry', though it is hard to imagine what could be *post* the breaking of so many boundaries. However, before any such modish *post*ness takes over, let us look at a few examples of different kinds of 'language' poetry (or 'language' writing).

Those who have produced the most interesting work, as I see it, are Ron Silliman, Michael Palmer, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, and two women, Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe. Here is one of the easiest and most straightforward of the poems, a short piece by Barrett Watten called 'Mode Z':

Could we have those trees cleared out of the way?
And the houses, volcanoes, empires? The natural
panorama is false, the shadows it casts are so many
useless platitudes. Everything is suspect. Even
clouds of the same sky are the same. Close the door
is voluntary death. There is one color, not any.

Prove to me now that you have finally undermined
your heroes. In fits of distraction the walls cover
themselves with portraits. Types are not men. Admit
that your studies are over. Limit yourself to your
memoirs. Identity is only natural. Now become
the person in your life. Start writing autobiography.

That poem has some, but not so much, of the discontinuity which is one of the commonest marks of 'language' writing. What it says about the 'useless platitudes', getting rid of 'your heroes', and having 'those trees cleared out of the way' reflects a typical 'language' poetry dislike of description, and myth, and the repetition of conventionally accepted ideas.

Watten's command to 'start writing autobiography' is taken up in a couple of lengthy works, book-length works by other writers, one in verse and one in prose. Ron Silliman's *What*, though a full-length book, is only part of a large-scale project he calls *The Alphabet*, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* is a self-contained autobiography. Silliman's book offers few concessions to the reader, since it is written continuously with no breaks or chapters, and with no overall narrative structure although it contains little fragments of narrative all the way through. Hejinian's book does have sections like chapters, but again, even though it is an autobiography it tells no connected story, and many facts that the reader would like to know are never presented or are left uncertain. Both books could be described as mosaics where the component sentences are picked up from different memory-piles, often with present comments from the author, yet not amounting to an overall pattern or picture as an actual mosaic would tend to be. There are *approaches* to pattern in both. In Silliman, there are recurring references to his personal appearance, to his beard, his thinning hair, his bad teeth, his poor eyesight and his glasses, to bus travel, to umbrellas, to styrofoam, to the word 'what' which is the title of the book. There is a succession of humorous commands, directed in a friendly fashion to the reader, e.g. 'Try running/for the bus with/an open umbrella', and 'Try picking your nose with gloves on'. And the whole book is punctuated with references to the Bay area of San Francisco. But you are never allowed to relax into an armchair posture of enjoying storytelling. Disjunction, not usually of syntax but of thought and location, is the pervading mode, with the aim, as in all 'language' writing, of forcing short-term attention on process and detail, not on the whole, for there is no whole. As the poem says at one point:

Legless beggar
is wheeled through the train,
shaking a coffee can
for alms, half-filled with coins.
This sentence points not
to the 'work as a whole'
(no such thing) but to your,
the reader's, life.

Here is a passage to convey the engaging flavour of Silliman's *What*:

He wears a windbreaker tied about his waist.
Catering truck's side converts to an awning. I
pour bitter lemon into the glass
just until the ice floats. Jessie's toes'
nails are thick, furrowed, opaque. The bath
is right if the skin turns pink, the pores open
and sweat floods until the salt stings
my eyes and my beard drips and the gold
ring on my finger swells. From the hill
I see the lanes of freeway traffic
move at different speeds. The inside
of my cheek swells
when bitten. The practice
of inside. Tar heater's
a trail to roofer's truck.
The trick to loose association is
cop to the bop. He stares
out the bus window, providing
the privacy to write. Rear of sofa
turned to livingroom window. Rear of
houses built on a hillside,
narrow stairways leading down.
Gouda thick with dill. The poem
is a pill against reason's too-narrow logic.
Pine too thick with sap for firewood.
"Widow-maker" they call the euc-
alyptus, the way the limbs drop.
One sigh fits all.

Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* also has a sort of shadowy sense of structure through repeated phrases which are brought in fairly arbitrarily as regards surrounding context but which give the reader a series of handholds or landmarks, such as a listener might receive from leitmotivs in music. These phrases include: 'A pause, a rose, something on paper' (which suggests perhaps the working of an autobiography), 'As for we who "love to be astonished"' which suggests, somewhat ungrammatically, the theme of a young creative person enjoying the unexpectedness of experience and also of memory), 'We were like plump birds along the shore' (suggesting the transitoriness yet the very palpable transitoriness, of life), 'It is hard to turn away from moving water' (process again; everything flows), and 'The obvious analogy is with music' (which might unite the idea of running water with the idea of leitmotivs or variations, small-scale structure but overall endlessness, as in some Indian music or Scottish pibroch). A passage will show how her prose works in practice. This is from a selection dealing with her adolescence, and has a characteristic mixture of memories and gnomic reflections:

> In New England, the weather builds character. I discovered that I could never quite remember how my favourite songs went. Irritated by motorbikes. After a certain point, one no longer hears any new ideas, must make do with new facts. The dance is best seen from the upper balcony. Take your place (one) not your places. He framed his sentences carefully. The sunrise falls through the windows. At home, in my reveries, with the split line on my palm to show a real life. It can hardly be subdivided. A standing, a leaving, an opening. Constellations, with stars, are nothing absorbed by a place. It might seem as if philosophy had been taken over by artists. The screen can be taken away from the fire as long as someone is sitting in the room. The horses in the dewy field overlope. But I don't like horse races because you don't get a chance to see the horses. The fox that survives is successful. It was winter but a warm night in New England for taking a walk in the snow crunch. Bleach had killed the mildew. What is one doing to, or with, the statement (the language) or the stated (the object or the idea) when one *means* it. A bottle of wine is different from a wine bottle. And milk in the warm snow delivered by a milkman. She worried that the wheel might come off at 65. There are always more leaves than flowers.

Probably in these two books the attachment, however fragmentary, to an actual life keeps the reader reasonably happy. But my next example is a short poem by Charles Bernstein called 'Stove's Out' which comes nearer the middle range of difficulty

which one would expect to find in 'language' poetry. It could be interpreted as a kind of love poem, or at least a poem about a relationship; there are references to a seaside place, to dress, to a confused mix of feelings. It begins to seem as if it wanted to fall into place, but it doesn't, and the reader is left with a series of uncertainties and ambiguities which nevertheless give pleasure, as Silliman and Hejinian give pleasure — not that that is the point, but pleasure keeps breaking in — even to readers uncommitted to the movement. The movement set its face against concepts like 'beauty' and 'pleasure' right from the start, regarding these as bourgeois consumerist seductions, and the more purist 'language' writers have tended to make a point of virtue of rebarbativeness, i.e. if the reader is not repelled or bewildered, at least initially (not necessarily finally, since the movement wants 'new readers'), the poem is not doing its work. But to return to the Bernstein piece, here it is. It is written with obvious care as to line structure and line length.

There is an emptiness that fills
Our lives as we meet
On the boulevards and oases
Of a convenient attachment. Boats
In undertone drift into
Incomplete misapprehension, get
All fired up inside. Altogether
A breeze down a long bounce
Furnishing behaviour for buttons.
A wrinkle arrests an outline,
Streamers inquire the like of which
Nobody in reach has any idea
Of. Wonder to have been
Brought there, a plastic shift
Unseating a chiffon shock.

In the last two lines, sound effects almost take over, but you are left with the ambiguity, tantalizing yet attractive, of 'plastic shift': is it a creative dislocation of language or a new style of dress? Several other parts of the poem share this sense of uncertainty. But somehow it stays in the mind, and you return to it.

In parenthesis, as it were, the question of whether 'staying in the mind' is a valid criterion in 'language' writing has to asked. Much 'language' poetry has neither image clusters nor recognizable syntax such as that Bernstein poem has. This makes it harder, but does it make it worse? If there is no 'human situation', do we switch off, or on the contrary do we bend closer?

Take one of the twenty-five five-line sections of Peter Inman's 'red shift':

> skull a wool off (sharpener whoiks) / fruitbowl covered with grammar / "what sound is" dissolved along a curve / d o o r l i k e n ' t / bent on a sea of turpentine. tongue extacks. / parred elapse / "pursuant to 5 USC 7114" (stomach under a film of hills) / fists balled, not "bellamy"

Apart from obvious problems of non-continuity, there are also problems of unusual (parred) or invented (extacks) words, problems of reference (USC, bellamy), and problems concedrning quotation-marks. Yet the associations thrown up (of sheep-shearing and pencil-sharpening in the opening phrase) and the ideas pushed forward (the category-impossibility of a nevertheless fascinating 'fruitbowl covered with grammar') seem to cooperate with the interest of wondering who (if anyone) 'bellamy' might be, or is he rather the 'bel ami' which the writer of the poem, with his fists balled, is not, since he hopes to fight the reader into a stance of attention? Whether or not all this will 'stay in the mind' is perhaps less important than whether the reader *is* going to be forced to bring forward a new kind of short-term attentiveness.

But to return to Bernstein: if Bernstein has a certain inwardness, a certain musicality, which can attract on a sensuous level, other poets put more emphasis on the outer, social, political concerns of the movement, where they can still use the disjunctive effects they like but on a more obviously rhetorical plane, not all that far removed in fact from the writing of the Beats, whom the 'language' poets do have some slight intermittent respect for. Here is an extract from 'Confidence Trick' by Bruce Andrews:

> Equality demands no less; history begins with old man crying, logic you know, airplay your fingertips is not freedom — The disintegrating slop situation on outlaw; red it in the voodoo prospectus, keep trying death squads paid for by our *Christianity* radiation taxes so that human rights clone improves because there are so few rebels left to kill, like iron filings — Polkadot mentality you capsulize it with a commemorative stamp, slunk down in the heroic mode for comfort, Belfast, Capetown, compose loonee tunes that could be written in the mind by institutional simpletons.
>
> Aesthetics pension comes first; dry business to do battle with easy embalming business, mistake rut-pink, impatient nauseating nerve — plastic Babylon is the joint, digital dance, you have got garbage, bad fountain of youth flanked by giant horses: pigmy redemption — Wavelength is only curious to die; preemptive redemption — brain rockabilly, anarchy out demographics itself

Let me say this. Neak Luong is a blur. It is Tuesday in the hardwood forest. I am a visitor here, with a notebook

The notebook lists My New Words and Flag above White. It claims to have no inside

only characters like A-against-Herself, B, C, L and N, Sam, Hans Magnus, T. Sphere, all speaking in the dark with their hands

G for Gramsci or Goebbels, blue hills, cities, cities withhills, modern and at the edge of time

F for alphabet, Z for A, an H in an arbor, shadow, silent wreckage, W or M among stars

What last. Lapwing. Tesseract. X perhaps for X. The villages are known as These Letters — humid, sunless. The writing occurs on their walls

That is still a 'language' poem. 'For a dollar I will have text with you' — not conversation or a meal or a drink. Or 'The notebook lists My New Words and Flag above White. It claims to have no inside / only characters.' And yet at the same time the whole recent history of Indo-China is there too. He brings the two aspects together himself, deliberately at the end. 'The villages are known as These Letters — humid, sunless. The writing occurs on their walls' —and there is no full stop to close the poem, it cannot be closed.

This is a far cry from Clark Coolidge in 1970, one of the slightly older but respected forerunners of the movement, one of whose poems goes like this:

erything

eral

stantly

ined

ards

cal

nize

This is like a poem from which the first half of each line has been cut off, and the reader may, if he wishes, play the game of filling in the gaps, making it as clear or as disjunctive as he wants, since each line in the poem could be part of a recognizable English word. A 'difficult' reading might be: 'Everything/mineral/constantly/fined/towards/radical/recognize'. But that remains, surely, a trivial piece, much more trivial than the strange 'Pcoet' poem of David Melnick, which we cannot complete. In a similar way, Susan Howe's long poem 'A Bibliography of the King's Book; or, Eikon Basilike', which recycles seventeenth-century forgeries and juxtaposes them with references to Milton and Hobbes and Dickens and real history and with passages of her own writing which are sometimes linear in the normal way and sometimes make use of rather faded spatial concrete poetry techniques — this work undoubtedly has a lot of interest and is a good instance of what the 'language' writers like to see: a poet-critic bringing both aspects into her creative writing. Yet in the end it seems to me to be backward-looking rather than avant-garde, whereas when I read Silliman of Hejinian or Palmer I sense a coming together of genuine strangeness, *ostranenie* as the Russian Formalists used to call it, defamiliarization, often in practice the sudden disjunctions of thought or syntax loved by the 'language' poets, and at the same time an interest in pushing and prodding at new boundaries of subject-matter which seems refreshing and forward-looking. There is undoubtedly something to be gained from these poets, and what it is might perhaps be indicated in a quotation from Roland Barthes, who is one of the 'language' writers' admired philosophers. In his *Writing Degree Zero* Barthes speaks about the zero degree of the word, found only in the dictionary or in poetry, where for example the noun need have no article, and where each poetic word is a sort of Pandora's box, full of potentiality rather than referentiality. 'This Hunger of the Word,' he says 'common to the whole of modern poetry, makes poetic speech terrible and inhuman. It initiates a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and over-nourishing signs, without foresight or stability of intention, and thereby so opposed to the social function of language that merely to have recourse to discontinuous speech is to open the door to all that stands above Nature'.

'Language' poetry in one of its aspects may be, in Barthes' phrase, 'terrible and inhuman', but it does seem also to be able to open doors on some surprising vistas, and these, it appears, are still waiting to be unlocked by the shafts and shifts of dislocated language and broken narrative. It may not be the case that the world is everything.