

The discrepancy between the number of people who hold an opinion about Language Poetry and those who have actually read Language Poetry is perhaps greater than for any other literary phenomenon of the later twentieth century. For just one concrete indicator of this gap, a primer on "The Poetry Pantheon" in *The New York Times Magazine* (19 February, 1995) listed Paul Hoover, Ann Lauterbach, and Leslie Scalapino as the most representative "Language Poets" — a curious choice given that neither Hoover nor Lauterbach appears in any of the defining publications of Language Poetry, and that Scalapino, though certainly associated with Language Poetry, was hardly a central figure. Indeed, only a quarter-century after the phrase was first used, it has often come to serve as an umbrella term for any kind of self-consciously "postmodern" poetry or to mean no more than some vaguely imagined stylistic characteristics — parataxis, dryly apodictic abstractions, elliptical modes of disjunction — even when they appear in works that would actually seem to be fundamentally opposed to the radical poetics that had originally given such notoriety to the name "Language Poetry" in the first place.

The term "language poetry" may have first been used by Bruce Andrews, in correspondence from the early 1970s, to distinguish poets such as Vito Hannibal Acconci, Carl Andre, Clark Coolidge, and Jackson Mac Low, whose writing challenged the vatic aspirations of "deep image" poetry. In the tradition of Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky, such poetry found precedents in only the most anomalous contemporary writing, such as John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*, Aram Saroyan's *Coffee Coffe*, Joseph Ceravolo's *Fits of Dawn*, or Jack Kerouac's *Old Angel Midnight*. As it was picked up by others, the phrase "language centered poetry" served the need for a way to indicate work that could be assimilated to none of the dominant poetic modes of the period. On the one hand, such writing stood in contrast not only to "deep image" poetry, but also to the anti-intellectual and speech-based poetics that characterized the various counterculture schools presented in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*: Beat, Black Mountain, New York School, San Francisco Renaissance, *et cetera*. On the other hand, such writing also challenged the confessional poetry of the East Coast establishment and the emphasis on "voice" and "craft" in the rhetoric of the increasingly ubiquitous academic workshop. In either case — whether the raw poetry of the counterculture or the cooked verse of the establishment — personal and emotive expression was seen to be the basis for poetry. Uneasy with this tenet, Language Poetry valued artifice over nature, writing over speech, metonymy over metaphor, and intellect over sentiment.

In 1973, Bruce Andrews edited a number of the journal *Toothpick, Lisbon, and the Orcas Islands*. Based on the eclectic radicalism of the journal *0 to 9*, which had been edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer in the late 1960s, Andrews' collection is the first clear indicator of the degree to which the poetic avant-garde of the 1970s would challenge the assumptions of contemporaneous poetry. A more focused, strategic, and self-conscious grouping of the avant-garde mode that would come to be termed "language poetry" came in 1975, when Ron Silliman edited a suite of work for the 'ethnopoetics' journal *Alcheringa*. His telegraphic headnote to the selections reads:

9 poets out of the present, average age 28, whose work might be said to 'cluster' about such magazines as *This*, *Big Deal*, *Tottel's*, the recent *Doones* supplements, the Andrews-edited issue of *Toothpick*, etc.

Called variously ‘language centered,’ ‘minimal,’ ‘non-referential formalism,’ ‘diminished referentiality,’ ‘structuralist.’ Not a *group*, but a *tendency* in the work of many (104).

In addition to Silliman himself, those “language centered” writers comprised Bruce Andrews, Barbara Barracks, Clark Coolidge, Lee DeJasu, Ray DiPalma, Robert Grenier, David Melnick, Barrett Watten. As other writers of “diminished referentiality” came into dialogue with one another, beginning to appear less like a tendency and more like a group, “Language Poetry” took on the feel of a proper name. In an essay published in 1977, introducing such work to a Canadian audience, Steve McCaffery uses the phrase in this nominal sense, and through an association with the title of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (edited by Andrews and Charles Bernstein), the name stuck.

In 1982, two other magazine collections attempted to present Language Poetry to a general poetry audience. The provocatively entitled “Realism” appeared in the journal *Ironwood*, again edited by Silliman, with an annotating essay by Kathleen Fraser, and the *Paris Review* presented a “Language Sampler,” edited by Charles Bernstein. Two subsequent book anthologies, Douglas Messerli’s “*Language*” *Poetries* and Silliman’s *In The American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry*, further expanded — and complicated — the names most associated with Language Poets. In addition to Andrews, DiPalma, and Watten, who appear in all five of these gatherings, the most frequently included writers are Charles Bernstein, Clark Coolidge, Tina Darragh, Alan Davies, Robert Grenier, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, P. Inman, Bob Perelman, Peter Seaton, James Sherry, Ron Silliman, Diane Ward, and Hanna Weiner. One also finds, with slightly less frequent appearances, Rae Armantrout, Alan Bernheimer, Michael Gottlieb, Ted Greenwald, and Susan Howe. Although they are not a presence in these particular collections, Michael Davidson, Michael Palmer, Steve McCaffery, and Tom Raworth were also closely associated with Language Poetry, and other writers who worked under its sign include David Bromige, Tom Beckett, Steve Benson, Abigail Child, Lynne Dreyer, Erica Hunt, David Melnick, Nick Piombino, Stephen Rodefer, Kit Robinson, and Fiona Templeton.

Unlike many earlier avant-garde movements, Language Poetry was never defined by an official membership list or shared manifesto, but the sense of a cohesive movement came in part from the surprisingly consistent roster of participants in a relatively closed economy of journal and book publishing, reviewing, and readings. Many of the writers, that is, were also creating the very venues in which each other's work appeared: editing journals, publishing small press books and chapbook series, producing radio programs, or curating reading and lecture series. Rather than working within already established institutions of publication and promotion, these writers established parallel sets of institutions. In particular, they put out journals devoted to poetry (including, in rough chronology: *Joglars*, *Tottle's*, *This*, *Hills*, *A Hundred Posters*, *Roof*, and *Miam*) as well journals more focused on theory, criticism, and reviews (including *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*; *The Difficulties*; *Paper Air*; *Tembler*; *Poetics Journal*; and *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"*). Moreover, the availability of increasingly affordable print technology in the 1970s permitted individuals to found a number of new presses, including The Figures, Tuumba, Sun & Moon, This, Potes and Poets, Pod, Asylum's, O Press, Awede, and Burning Deck. Additionally, programs such as Lyn Hejinian and Kit Robinson's "In the American Tree" (KPFA), Susan Howe's "Poetry" (WBAI), and Bob Perelman's "Talks Series" provided forums for the further dissemination of the new poetry and poetics.

Indeed, the robust discussions of poetics and the simultaneous production of both poetical and theoretical texts came to be seen as a hallmark of Language Poetry. The familiar references to the writings of Frankfurt School,

French deconstruction, and Russian Formalism, taken together with the highly visible, lively, and sometimes strident debates over poetics, the conception of poetry as an intellectual art, and the development of hybrid forms of writing that combined poetry and criticism (such as the collage style of review essay showcased in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*), led some detractors to charge that the tail of theory was wagging the dog of poetry. The publication record and correspondence of the poets does not support this premise, but Language Poets did set themselves apart with the assumption that poets would articulate their writerly projects in intellectual and theoretically grounded terms

A further sense of coterie emerged as the personal and social relationships between these writers developed, with communities coalescing in the San Francisco Bay Area, and less visibly in New York City and Washington D. C., where Michael Lally and Doug Lang energized a politicized avant-garde writing scene. However, one of the most striking aspects of the parallel institutions developed around Language Poetry points away from coterie and toward a larger audience of interested readers. In addition to new presses and journals, an unprecedented network of formal distribution was elaborated and established. In addition to Berkeley's Small Press Distribution (which replaced the distribution service that had been run out of Serendipity Books since 1969), New York's Segue Book Distribution (in operation from 1980 to 1993 and associated with Roof Books and Roof magazine), and to a lesser extent the Minneapolis based Bookslinger (which began as Truck Distribution in 1976, and operated until 1993) disseminated the hundreds of small press books published by Language Poets.

As the wider audience for Language Poetry emerged and the social groupings of its participants solidified, the presumption of a collective program, homogeneous style, or shared poetics made many of the writers anxious about the term itself, which for a time was often put in scare quotes and prevaricated to "so-called 'language' poetry," just as the inclusion or exclusion of equals signs between the letters, in imitation of the journal's name, seemed to require justification by critics and reviewers. As the term eventually came to be more or less grudgingly accepted even by the writers themselves, the nagging question of a defining poetics, accordingly, remained — as did the increasingly obvious fact that any strict or unifying definition would require so many exceptions as to be of little use. Nonetheless, critics have noted various aspects of a family resemblance; and regardless of their applicability to the poetry itself, one can easily trace repeated themes in the discussion about Language Poetry.

The comforting fiction of a unified lyric subject, for instance, has been a frequent target of Language Poetry. As Charles Bernstein summed it up: to take the self as the primary organizing principle of writing would be a mistake (*Content's Dream*, 408). For many of the Language writers, that self was replaced with an Althusserian subject, constructed at the intersection of social institutions, and the poet understood as an "author function" in Foucauldian terms. Others envisioned a multiple and contradictory subject in the terms proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; while still others picked up on the poetic tradition of Arthur Rimbaud's sense of "being thought" or "being written" because "*Je est une autre* [The "I" is an other]." As the force of the authorial "I" was dispersed in these ways, an attendant argument for the empowerment of the reader was proposed. Based on Umberto Eco's model of the "open" text, and encouraged by Roland Barthes' prediction that "the death of the author" would be predicated on the birth of the reader, Language Poets frequently invoked the figure of an active reader collaboratively constructing meanings rather than passively receiving the writer's message.

This reconceptualization of the relation between writer and reader was one of the ways that Language Poetry pitted itself against a model of language in which communication was imagined as a "conduit," "transom," or

"bullet." In that model, a sender was seen to transfer a stable message to a receiver with little flux or interference. By focusing instead on the materiality of the message and the context of its transmission, Language Poets continued to modify and reconfigure the communicative model, repeatedly questioning the naturalness of language in the process. Many early works, including *zaum'* like compositions of nonce words, cultivated indeterminacy or organized language in terms of its material properties rather than its discursive message. With a focus on an independent linguistic sign that was not subservient to its referent, these poems foreground their own text rather than being oriented toward any external reference. At the same time, many poems displayed an analogous interest in testing the seemingly natural fit and hierarchical relation between signifier and signified.

In the late 1970s, many of the writers associated with Language Poetry began to shift their attention to longer prose works, and to develop the distinctive mode of radically disjunctive parataxis that Ron Silliman termed "the new sentence." Such writing would characterize much of Language Poetry in the 1980s, but even with this new style's tendency towards fewer grammatical disruptions and a greater interest in discursive social speech, the poems continued to emphasize the constructedness and artifice of writing, rather than any kind of natural or unmediated expression. In part, this defamiliarization was inspired by Russian Formalism and took the form of estranging colloquial language or laying bare the devices by which literary language achieved its effects. But the sense of linguistic estrangement was also influenced by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language constructs reality rather than describes it, inflecting rather than reflecting our experience. A similar sense of the relation between the social and linguistic provided the ground for the political dimension many Language Poets claimed for their writing. Continuing the dream of the twentieth century's avant-gardes, this claim proposed that disruptions in the textual order were analogous to, or could even provoke, disruptions in the social order.

While those political goals may not have been achieved, Language Poetry did succeed in affecting the style of many poets — even those far removed from the history and assumptions of Language Poetry — who have acquired a greater tolerance for disjunction, disruption, and abstraction in the wake of Language Poetry's more radical example. The phenomenon of Language Poetry is still too recent and evolving to permit any definitive conclusions about its ultimate transformation or demise, but if literary history is any guide, two conditions will define the fate of Language Poetry's future. First, from any broader perspective on American poetry in general, individual writers will emerge as more or less significant poets, regardless of any group affiliation or activities. Second, the initial function of Language Poetry as an avant-garde challenging dominant poetic modes and established institutions will be taken on not by writing that continues in the Language Poetry vein (second or third "generation" Language Poetry, or its imitators), but by one of the modes that Language Poetry itself refused, repressed, or could not at the time imagine: conceptual, procedural, visual, digital, *et cetera*.

FURTHER READING

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