

Let me take the occasion of this interview as the opportunity to question one of the received ideas about contemporary poetry: "the assimilation of 'language poetry' into the academy" where it is converted into "academic cultural capital."¹

I want to bracket what I recognize as Inman's main point in reiterating that claim: the arguments about strategy and determinism (with a smart distinction between ethical and strategic questions). Those two central theoretical arguments — one about the relative value of models of intervention from within given institutional structures as opposed to the outright rejection of those structures and the construction of parallel networks, and the other about the direction of change within certain institutions — both seem relevant and important.

Instead of taking up those general and theoretical questions, however, I want to focus on the very specific notion of Language poetry's assimilation in the academy, which strikes me — from a perspective squarely within the academy — as being simply not true. If anything, this seems distinctly *less* true today than it did a decade ago; whatever currency Language poetry might once, briefly, have managed to acquire now seems to be strongly devalued.

I suspect that the appearance of that assimilation comes in part from a chronological coincidence: a moment when Language poetry was just beginning to feel sufficiently coherent and historical to be canonizable, and when questions of "canon" itself were still a hot topic in academia. Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic* (1995), the first volume of Hank Lazer's *Opposing Poetries*, and Jed Rasula's *American Poetry Wax Museum* (both 1996) are all products of that moment and all speak to that conjunction, addressing the issue with more depth and nuance than I can here. I want to sound a counter note not to argue with their conclusions, *per se*, but because I think the landscape looks rather different now than it did a decade ago, when those books were being written. Douglas Messerli's Sun & Moon showcase *From the Other Side of the Century* and Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* both appeared in 1994, following hard on the publication of Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry Since 1950* in 1993 and with the promised second volume of Jerome Rotherberg and Pierre Joris' *Poems for the Millennium* in the works.

¹ See "a different table altogether": P. Inman in Conversation with Roger Farr & Aaron Vidaver," *Documents in Poetics* 4 [Thuja Books, 2003]: 11).

Without doubt, those publications do suggest that the works of at least some Language poets are finding their way into college classrooms.² To judge the true extent those inclusions, however, would require a comparison of actual syllabi from a wide sampling of schools in order to see not only what books are adopted but what selections are actually assigned from those books. Whatever those data might reveal, one should note that the dramatic canonical interventions of those anthologies did not create much of a ripple effect. If anything, they may have been inoculations — indeed, as the inverted phrasing and article of the title suggest (*Norton* coming after the colon; and *A* rather than *The*), W. W. Norton did not intend its *Postmodern* anthology to imply the same canonical authority of its other volumes.

The brand new *Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (2003), by contrast, contains poems by only four writers associated with Language poetry: Michael Palmer, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein [32 out of 1050 pages]; *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*: one poem by Bernstein and another by Bob Perelman; *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*: two Michael Palmer poems; *The Norton Reader*: no one; *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poems*: no one. A look at Norton's chief competitors reveals more of the same: in the new *Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000), Howe, Palmer, and Ron Silliman [38 out of 1,233 pages], but in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*: no one; *Heath's Understanding Literature*: no one; the *Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*: no one. More boutique volumes, like A. Poulin Jr.'s *Contemporary American Poetry* and Helen Vendler's *Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*: no one.

By taking this roll-call, I do not mean to deny a certain trend — merely to put the contours of that trend into context. There is an increasing, if still only nominal, inclusion of Language poetry in textbook anthologies (just as there have indeed been a number of Language poets hired as professors). But at the same time, the details of that modest 'success' of Language poetry in academia is also another an indicator of its inoculating titration, and this may well be the more interesting and important lesson of its fate in the academy.

² One might also note that although Messerli's earlier "*Language*" *Poetries* (New Directions, 1987) is out of print, the other founding anthology, Ron Silliman's 1986 collection *In The American Tree: Language, Realism, Thought* was reprinted in 2002.

Part of that fate has been a simultaneous narrowing and widening of the scope of the term "Language Poetry." On the one hand, as those anthology inclusions indicate, there has been a decimating selectivity. "Language poetry," for many of its defenders as well as its detractors, has come to be represented by a select set of the more accessible, and more conventionally lyrical, mid-career works by a very few authors. "Language poetry," in short, reduced to some pages from Hejninian's *My Life*, a few humorous Bernstein poems, and lyrics by two poets (Palmer and Howe) frequently exempted from "really" being Language poets in the first place.³ On the other hand, there has also been a broad expansion of the term to encompass writers not originally associated with Language poetry and to designate works that would actually seem to be opposed to the poetics once argued for in a journal like *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. For many people, that is, "Language poetry," has come to mean merely some vaguely imagined stylistic characteristics: a certain apodictic abstraction, parataxis, and an elliptical mode of disjunction — but never, in any event, anything too terribly radical.⁴

"Academia," of course, is not a monolithic institution, but rather a set of competing and contradictory subcultures and communities. To whatever extent Language poetry has been assimilated through vehicles like the Norton *Postmodern*, that assimilation has been uneven, and its points of absorption appear to be more the creative writing workshop than the literature class. Indeed — and this is my main point of contention — teaching or writing about Language poetry as a literary subject seems actually to have a negative value in academia.

Which is not to say that very successful academics have not written quite visibly about

³ Let me be very clear: I do not want to imply that there is anything lamentable about those inclusions in and of themselves; as it happens, these are all works that I admire, and have in fact taught and written about myself; but they are hardly the poems by which I would define the essence of "Language poetry."

⁴ In the end, this state of affairs may actually portend Language poetry's hope for a more profound impact. The omission of writers such as Inman, Andrews, and Melnick from academic venues means that "Language poetry," *as it was originally defined*, still has the chance to make its mark. Work like Inman's, absent from even the Hoover and Rothenberg anthologies, has remained unassimilated not only by the academy, but also by those very poetry communities that have recently assumed the mantle of the avant-garde and claimed to follow in the wake of Language poetry. Should such poetry emerge from its decades of institutional hibernation and make its mark, it will not be in the form of derivatives and titrations; any true avant-garde provokes a legacy that looks very different from itself, and any true legacy will make its avant-garde progenitor uncomfortable. I suspect that any real institutional success of Language poetry will not be recognizable to the Language poets themselves.

Language poetry: Marjorie Perloff, most obviously, and to a lesser extent Jerome McGann, Charles Altieri, and others (though it is also worth remembering that Perloff's first published essay on Language poetry appeared after she was a named professor at U. S. C. and the author of four books; McGann a named professor at C. I. T. who had authored or edited a dozen books, *et cetera*). But what about those who started with far less institutional capital to begin with? At the time of Inman's interview (2003), the MLA database listed about 15 books and dissertations on Language Poetry. Setting aside Perloff and Perelman for the reasons just stated, the authors of those volumes include two in tenured positions (at Ohio University and the U. of Wales at Aberystwyth), 5 Assistant Professors (Georgian Court College, Penn State Altoona, Simon Fraser, U. Southern New Hampshire, and U. Maine), 2 lecturers (Old Dominion [teaching faculty] and The Rochester Institute of Technology), an Assistant Librarian (Wayne State), a part time worker at a children's book publisher, and someone who has dropped out of academia altogether. From one perspective, this catalogue clearly reflects a substantial amount of academic work, professional dialogue, and institutional support, and I do not in any way want to suggest that these individuals — or individual positions and institutions — are not somehow successful. But considering the overall number of colleges and universities, and the number of graduate students and professors, the list does not strike me as evidence of any substantial accumulation of "cultural capital" within academia.

One could obviously do a more thorough search than my quick glance at the MLA listings. To begin with, one might use other databases (library catalogues, publisher's lists, *et cetera*) to account for books and dissertations not indexed in the MLA under the heading "language poetry." Similarly, one could expand the search to include articles, reviews, and books with individual chapters on particular authors associated with Language poetry.⁵ Additionally, nonpublished indicators (such as conference papers and panels) could be graphed, and one should keep in mind that all of these numbers — if not their rates — will increase with time. Such an expanded analysis would certainly augment and complicate the accounting, but read against the many *tens of thousands* of academics it would not change the general look of the landscape.

⁵ In January 2006, an MLA database for "language poetry" returned 105 results. Again, I would not want to minimize that figure, but I do want to insist on remembering that the number comes out of total of 1,069,526 works indexed for the same period. Compare those hundred or so publications to the 3,195 entries for "postcolonial," the 3,752 for "Benjamin," the 4,096 for "Chaucer," and so on.

To reiterate: my point is not that Language poetry has had no role in building (or dismantling) certain careers, but rather that the sense of Language Poetry as institutionally successful, or a tool in the career building of professors, is like saying that Coventry Patmore has been assimilated by the academy and converted into cultural capital. To a certain extent that would be true enough, as the handful of books and dissertations on Patmore attest (and no doubt individual careers have been made by cashing in that intellectual capital), but one hardly thinks of 'Patmore's assimilation by academia' or the cultural capital he bestows. As with Language poetry, those cases are individual and contingent, rather than general trends or rules.

In the end, it may be far less interesting to ask whether Language poetry has been assimilated by the academy than to ask why that idea of academic assimilation has always been such an important part of the story people tell about Language poetry — and that Language poetry has told about itself — and why it forms such an essential aspect of the ideology of the concept.