
"endless PROTEANL inkages"

Language Poetry and the Avant-Garde Tradition

I begin this essay with an apparent oxymoron: avant-garde tradition. As art critic Rosalind Krauss explains in her essay "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," one of the key myths of early twentieth-century avant-garde art is its original status, its supposed separation from the "corrupt" tradition (or "institution" as critic Peter Bürger puts it) of art. But Krauss goes on to claim that the avant-garde work—like all works of art—is always already a copy. It is a copy in two senses: (1) it copies formal techniques that can always be found in previous works, and (2) it copies what is already a copy, one code signifying not a referent "in the world" but another code or trope. The supposed original, in other words, is already a repetition.

Whether or not the avant-garde can be characterized by its reputed valorization of the original—Duchamp's ready-mades at the very least complicate such an attribution—Krauss's repudiation of the concept of originality dispenses with the related notion that there cannot be an avant-garde tradition. The vanguard, then, can be seen as made up not by those who have new ideas but by those who challenge their time's hegemonic conceptualization of art.

More specifically, however, we can identify certain techniques, concepts, and social stances as characteristic of the avant-garde of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The technical emphasis of this period is the foregrounding of the aesthetic medium, which for poetry predominantly means the self-reflexive use of language. The period's conceptual emphasis, beginning roughly with the artistic appropriation of Walter Pater's impressionism, has tended to be the relativist challenge to empiricist notions of perception and representation. And its social stance has generally been anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment, anti-institutional, and anti-commercial, a stance often but not always associated with leftist politics—some notable exceptions being Ezra Pound and the Italian Futurists.

I will begin with a qualified definition of avant-garde in order to dispense with the possible misapprehension that what has come to be called Language poetry is something radically new. Certainly when contrasted with much of American verse written in the past twenty years or so, such as that which

appears in *American Poetry Review* (a verse which poses the poem as the expression of a significant and often personal experience of the individual poet), then Language poetry might appear quite new. And one might argue that the particular concerns of many Language poets—such as the question of reference, of the bourgeois monadic subject, and of the role of language (and ideology) in constituting our experience—are fairly recent concerns growing out of the structuralist intervention in the human sciences since the 1950s.

But most of the poets I will discuss insist on seeing their work as a continuation of the American modernist project, as the title of Ron Silliman's recent anthology of Language poetry, *In the American Tree*, suggests. The formal qualities which I will treat in this chapter, though not common among other poets today, have a rich century-long tradition.

By "tradition," however, I do not mean to imply some teleological unfolding of lines of aesthetic kinship, as would be behind a statement such as "Language poet Bruce Andrews is the direct heir of Russian Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov." What I *do* mean by the word "tradition" is a roughly similar set of concerns and techniques, a general self-conscious positioning of the artists against the dominant aesthetic assumptions of their day. In other words, I reject the impulse to try to establish a direct line of influence, but I do see the need for recognizing certain formal, conceptual, and/or political similarities between the writers who have come to be called Language poets and particular poets of the past, such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Vladimir Mayakovsky, André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Charles Olson, and John Ashbery. Only by recognizing such similarities can we then attempt to see the specific historical differences between poets of different periods. Only then can we attempt to determine the interplay of formal qualities and historical contexts. For although we may see formal similarities between certain Russian Futurist poets and certain Language poets, we must also take into account the social contexts of each—the Russian Revolution for the former, and the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate age of capitalist recession for the latter.

In light of all this, my first example of an important precursor may seem odd, since she has hardly, until recently, been associated with avant-garde aesthetics or oppositional politics. Besides Walt Whitman, however, Emily Dickinson stands out as American poetry's first major formal innovator. In particular, Susan Howe—a writer who, though hating the label, is often associated with Language poetry—sees Dickinson as a major precursor of her own work. Such a connection between the two is not readily apparent; but Howe explains her indebtedness to Dickinson in her recent study, *My Emily Dickinson*. In discussing "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun," Howe writes:

for Emily Dickinson, who was geographically separated from European custom, the past, that sovereign source, must break poetic structure open for future absorption of words and definition. . . . [She] adopted parataxis and rupture to tell the feverish haste, the loss, to warn of storm approaching [the Civil War]—Brute force, mechanism. Cassandra was a woman. All power, including the power of Love, all nature, including the nature of Time, is utterly unstable. (p. 116)

Even though Dickinson's work is written "in the plain style of puritan literary tradition [and] there are no complications of phrasing," Howe points out that "Each word is deceptively simple, deceptively easy to define. But definition seeing rather than perceiving, hearing and not understanding, is only the shadow of meaning. Like all poems on the trace of the holy, this one [above] remains outside the protection of specific solution" (p. 35). Howe's description of Dickinson's work not surprisingly describes her own as well: attraction to the past; breaking of poetic form; absorption of words and definitions; parataxis; rupture; concern with women and power and instability; and disdain for the protection of specific solution. These features can be seen in the following poem from *Defenestration of Prague*:

Transgression links remembering
Dark spell

terror Ideal
(spangs like stars)

Winter
a wound to the sun

empty desolation of mortality

Old age of winter
(lean pallor

bone ghost)
plunder and massacre

Florimell embarks blindly
(being lost)

to interpret the world

chivalric courtesy
chivalric constancy

quelled liturgy
(double sense softly)

illusory sanctuary of memory

Seven men suggest an army
furious humor of cruelty

Fantasticity
nimble phantasma capering on a page

with antic gesture

Being the sixth poem of the second section of the book, this poem, like most of Howe's works, stands both as a part of a series and as a discrete unit. Such is the case with the positioning of the words within the poem, each connected to each with only a hint at syntax. The words and phrases skate around the object of the poem, providing brief flashes and suggestions of context, but giving no clear picture of what we are reading about and no clear sense of distinct compound units of words. Such syntactical indeterminacy—due to the lack of punctuation other than parenthesis, the complicated enjambment, and the ambiguous capitalization of words—resists the totalization and hierarchy of the sentence, an indeterminacy which can be seen both as a political and an epistemological analogy to the book's theme. The Defenestration of Prague, Howe has explained in correspondence, "was the violent event that ushered in the Thirty Years War. . . . This Defenestration marked the end of a dream for some kind unity between science, mysticism, and art." It also marked the return of the violent papal repression of difference and controversy, the stamping out of artistic, intellectual, and spiritual freedom.

For Howe the opening up of syntax is the opening up of thought, the denial of imposed intellectual categories. "Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein," Howe writes, ". . . conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of the sentence?" (*My Emily Dickinson*, 11). What is needed is a new grammar: "Fantasticality/ nimble phantasma capering on a page// with antic gesture."

Stein's work, as Howe suggests, is a second major precursor of Language poetry. The December 1978 issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (the journal, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, which served as a forum for poets involved with so-called language-writing) began with a special feature on readings of Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914). A key passage from these readings is the first poem in Stein's work:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

Before attempting to analyze the significance of this poem for many of the Language poets, I want to quote extensively from certain readings by the poets themselves. Michael Davidson writes:

[Most critics] operate on either side of a referential paradigm; one wants her to mean nothing and the other wants her to mean intrinsically. But what makes *Tender Buttons* so vital is not the strategies by which meaning is avoided or encoded but how each piece points at possibilities for meaning. Unlike the Symbolist who

creates beautiful detachable artifacts, Stein's prose is firmly tied to the world—but it is a world constantly under construction, a world in which the equation of word and thing can no longer be taken for granted. "The difference is spreading" not only foreshadows deconstructive thought; it recognizes that between one term (a carafe) and a possible substitute (a blind glass) exists a barrier, not an equal sign, and it is this difference which supports all signification.

From Jackson Mac Low (a fellow traveler and precursor of much in Language poetry):

But can I specify anything beyond sounds? To use a phrase I first heard from Spencer Holst, it gives "the sensation of meaning," but can I connect the meanings of the words as readily as I find their sounds connected?

Beyond the obvious fact that the carafe is made of glass I can see only certain connections of meanings.

From Robert Grenier:

It's not "snapshots" (moves; don't copy nature), & it's not "the pathetic fallacy" (though it includes much of the artist's process). And it ain't "abstract."

While each of these poets approaches the poem differently, a general consensus does seem to emerge. Stein's importance for them appears to lie in the following qualities of her work:

1. Although her work *appears* to be meaningless, it does have meaning; in fact, it seems to be an exploration of the very conditions for meaning.
2. Meaning is not forwarded as something existing out in the world but as an interaction between subject and object.
3. Her work appears to operate under the assumptions of the Saussurean conception of meaning as a function of a system of difference.
4. She does not write in order to enclose (define, delimit, decipher) the world but to move within it; in other words, she does not function according to the static determinism of the noun but through the process of relationship.
5. Her foregrounding of the material side of language (sound, rhythm, syntax) is a formal analogy of the process of perception—the "movement 'spreading' from transparency . . . to the implied darkness & opacity of blindness."

Language poet Lyn Hejinian argues in *Tembler* 3 (1986) that Stein's language is not only meaningful but is in fact a form of realism superior to what we customarily call realism, a mimesis not of the external object but of the perceptual process, a realism not of subject matter but of artistic means. Stein offers a later generation of poets a way of making sense of the way we make sense.

As Robert Grenier goes on to point out in his *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* essay, however, Stein's other work may not offer itself so readily as a model for the Language school:

... I think it's at best a "creative misreading" of Stein to take her work as a whole as a primary instance of "language-oriented writing." . . . ([Her other works], if anything, a prototype of confessional poetry) all are intent to make new ways to say something—show her thinking language not as object-in-itself, but as composition functioning in the composition of the world.

In other words, while there may be formal similarities between *Tender Buttons* and some Language poetry, Grenier claims that there is also a significant difference in their aims for poetry.

The attraction of *Tender Buttons* for poet Ron Silliman lies in Stein's use of the sentence rather than the line as the unit of composition. The sentences in Stein's portraits of homely objects are juxtaposed so as to create friction, like the units of perspective are in a Cubist painting. In standard prose, sentences are arranged within the paragraph in syllogistic order, one premise contributing logically to the preceding and succeeding ones. But Stein's sentence arrangement challenges our syllogistic expectations. "The syllogistic move above the sentence level to an exterior reference is possible," Silliman writes, "but the nature of the book reverses the direction of this movement. Rather than making the shift in an automatic and gestalt sort of way, the reader is forced to deduce it from the partial views and associations posited in each sentence" (*The New Sentence*, 84).

Tender Buttons thus presages the "New Sentence," Silliman's term for contemporary prose poetry of the type that he and his associates often write. Silliman characterizes the "New Sentence" as follows:

- 1) The paragraph (rather than the stanza) organizes the sentences;
- 2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
- 3) Sentence length (rather than the line) is a unit of measure;
- 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
- 5) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited; (b) controlled;
- 6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
- 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, the sentence level or below. (*The New Sentence*, p. 91)

Here is an example from his *Tjanting* (1981):

Forcing oneself to it. It wld've been new with a blue pen. Giving oneself to it. Of about to within which what without. Hands writing. Out of the rockpile grew poppies. Sip mineral water, smoke cigar. Again I began. One sees seams. These clouds break up in the late afternoon, blue patches. I began again but it was not beginning. Somber hue of gray day sky filled the yellow room. Ridges & bridges. Each sentence accounts for all the rest. I was I discovered on the road. Not this. Counting my fingers to get different answers. Four wooden chairs in the yard,

rain-warpd, wind-blown. Cat on the bear rug naps. Grease sizzles & spits on the stove top. In paradise plane wrecks are distributed evenly throughout the desert. All the same, no difference, no blame. Moon's rise at noon. In the air hung odor of ammonia. I felt disease. Not not not-this. Reddest red contains trace of blue. That to the this then. What words tear out. All elements fit into nine crystal structures. Waiting for the cheese to go blue. Thirty-two. Measure meters pause. Applause. (p. 12)

What makes this an example of the "New Sentence" is not the nature of the sentences themselves—even though some of them do stand out because of their nonstandard diction or syntax—but the arrangement of the individual sentences within the paragraph and within the poem as a whole (which is 213 pages long). Despite its inverted syntax, "Out of the rock pile grew poppies," for instance, is a fairly ordinary referential sentence. Coming right after "Hands writing," however, this sentence seems to demand to be encapsulated between quotation marks, to be presented as an example of what hands write rather than as a direct statement to be taken at face value. "Rockpile" is then metonymically recalled in the following sentence in "mineral water," while the self-conscious attention to usually rote actions, sipping and smoking, refers back to "Hands writing." Not much later our rockpile sentence becomes recontextualized even further by "One sees seams," which refers in part to the reader's perception of Silliman's writing process itself—the deliberate focusing of attention on the contextualizing process of writing—the rockpile now becoming a trope for the pile of sentences which is *Tjanting*, out of which, despite superficial appearances, meaning coheres and accretes. The gaps between sentences (the locus of tension or "torque"), the visible seams, here take the place of the line break and draw our attention to the materiality of the words as words, not simply as transparent signifiers.

Such writing is reminiscent not only of Stein but of William Carlos Williams as well, especially his *Kora in Hell* (1918). Influenced as Stein was by the European avant-garde painters, particularly the Cubists and the Dadaists, Williams writes words and sentences that continually drift between materiality and transparency. The following paragraph from *Kora in Hell* illustrates the "torquing" of sentences that Silliman values:

How smoothly the car runs. This must be the road. Queer how a road juts in. How the dark catches among those trees! How the light clings to the canal! Yes, there's one table taken, we'll not be alone. This place has possibilities. Will you bring *her* here? Perhaps—and when we meet on the stair, shall we speak, say it is some acquaintance—or pass silent? Well, a jest's a jest but how poor this tea is. Think of a life in this place, here in these hills by these truck farms. Whose life? Why there, back of you. If a woman laughs a little loudly one always thinks that way of her. But how she bedizens the country-side. Quite an old world glamour. If it were not for—but one cannot have everything. What poor tea it was. How cold it's grown. Cheering, a light is that way among the trees. That heavy laugh! How it will rattle these branches in six weeks' time. (*Imaginations*, 37)

I na	And on
neyo	It
vstayushchikh zvyozd	Lightly rest
legko opyorlis nogi.	The feet of awakening stars.
No gi-	But the per-
bel. . . .	dition. . . .

(Brown, 75)

The focus here is on homophonic syllables, which Mayakovsky isolates and repeats in order to increase their ambiguity and to foreground their materiality. There remains nevertheless a clear thematic reference to the Russian Revolution, which like the morning will bring a new day from out of the present darkness. Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh reduced their poetic focus even further, however, to a poetry of neologistic syllables called *zaum*, or transrational poetry. The following poem by Kruchonykh is probably the most famous of the Futurist *zaum* poems, made up entirely of nonsense (or, as Kruchonykh preferred, *transsense*) syllables:

dyr	bul	shchyl
	ubeshchur	
	skum	
vy	so	bu
r	l	ez

(Brown, 58)

The intention, apparent in the term "transrational," is not to do away with meaning but to isolate the building block, so to speak, of meaning—the syllable. Such a practice appears again in the work of Language poet David Melnick. From his work *PCOET* (1972):

seta
 colecc
 puilse, i
 canoe
 it spear heieo
 as Rea, cinct pp
 pools we sly drosp
 Geianto

(o sordea, o weedsea!)

(In the American Tree, 91)

In "A Short Word on My Work" Melnick writes, "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" (p. 13). Rather than continuing the *zaum* search for the basic units of meaning, Melnick here seems to deny meaning completely. But he

goes on to qualify that impression: although the "world of meaning . . . doesn't fit," he nonetheless continues to seek ways of coming to terms with it. To that extent he carries on the *zaum* tradition.

Similar to and roughly contemporaneous with the Futurists, the Dadaists also anticipate some of the formal developments of and to a certain degree the social stance towards the institution of art of Language poetry. The Dada movement strove to reveal the stagnant and corrupt nature of art as an institution of bourgeois society. In "An Introduction to Dada" Tristan Tzara explains that the Dadaists descended from two revolutionary French traditions, the political (the Commune, the Revolution) and the poetic (the literary tradition of Baudelaire, Nerval, Rimbaud, Lautreamont, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Jarry, St. Pol Roux, and Apollinaire). But in the midst of World War I, Tzara and others became disgusted with the social impotence of Aestheticism; they wanted to make poetry and life one. "It seemed to us," Tzara writes, "that the world was losing itself in idle babbling, that literature and art had become institutions located on the margin of life, that instead of serving man they had become the instruments of an outmoded society" up to its knees in war dead (p. 403).

A Dada poem, then, may superficially resemble a poem by Mallarmé or Lautreamont in its attention to language as language rather than as a transparent medium of representation. But the impulse behind Dada was not to extract itself from a rationalistic, mercenary, and intellectually stifling bourgeois society. The Dadaists sought a revolutionary change in society and a reintegration of poetry into daily praxis. The formal techniques of Dadaist poetry were all part of this challenge carried out by rejecting the hegemonic notions of art, by creating an anti-art (see Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*). In 1916 Hugo Ball gave a reading of his abstract poems, which resemble the Futurists' *zaum* in their foregrounding of sound and rhythm and their use of nonsense words. One of Ball's poems begins: "zimzim urallala zimzim urullala zimzim zanzibar zimzalla zam" (Richter, 43). Unlike Khlebnikov's search for the kernels of meaning, however, Ball's poems were presented as a challenge to the notion that poetry should have meaning at all.

Duchamp's Dada ready-mades challenged a number of institutional aesthetic concepts all at once. The most famous example is his *Fountain* (1917), the urinal which he signed "R. Mutt" and submitted to the first New York Society of Independent Artists exhibition. By submitting an ordinary object to an art show, Duchamp questioned the status of the work of art as something inherently aesthetic; the art status of any object, he implied, depends on a set of unexamined social conventions, not on any quality inherent in the object. Also, by choosing a mass-produced object such as a urinal, he challenged the notion of a single original work as well as the valorization of the individual artist's creative expression, a critique furthered by the signature on the urinal.

Another formal characteristic of some Dada poetry is the use of disjunct

syntax, sometimes achieved through chance procedures of composition. Tzara wrote a recipe for making a Dadaist poem: take an article from a newspaper, cut out as many words as you want for the poem, put them in a bag and shake it, then take them out one at a time, writing down each word in the order of its appearance. Tzara's "Manifesto of mr. aa the anti-philosopher" illustrates his manipulations of syntax and his use of discordant series of images:

I've forgotten something:
where? why? how?
in other words:

ventilator of cold examples will have to serve as a cavalcade to the fragile snake and i never had the pleasure of seeing you my dear rigid the ear will emerge of its own accord from the envelope like all marine confections and the products of the firm of Aa & Co. chewing gum for instance and dogs have blue eyes, I drink camomile tea, they drink wind, Dada introduces new points of view, nowadays people sit at the corners of tables, in attitudes sliding a little to the left and right, that's why I'm angry with Dada, wherever you go insist on the abolition of D's, eat Aa, rub yourself down with Aa toothpaste, buy your clothes from Aa. Aa is a handkerchief and a sex organ wiping its nose, a rapid noiseless—rubber-tired—collapse, needs no manifestoes, or address books, gives a 25% discount buy your clothes from Aa he has blue eyes. (p. 85)

Bruce Andrews's recent work, *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)*, invokes the anger and disgust of Dada, as seen in this excerpt from "Isolate Your Fuse" (1986):

Isolate your fuse
my sentimentalization of hatred juggling for Jesus; hardware sweats at bedside discipline can be good detective, time for the blanket show. I wish into chocolate that's bloodhound prone facts, make prime less waste—if only I had strangled it in its tank.

I'm too proud to think
you want to be liberated but basically you're just a dental supply fixture, shoot them in the head to anesthetize them; hype anchors the argument like Mary Poppins under the thumb of a filthy vein body just another android fun machine. Quadrulus circuli sweethearts maneuver their sanitary napkins into impenetrable cabinetry; startled starlets squared by squids, alla-y'all sucker sucker muhfuhs—punk beliefs can be bought. 6 trolls out of 7 news be sweat holiday prophylactic fishhead bloodclot—meanwhile back at the political.

Who wears the blonde wig in *that* family? Dollies hurt leg: I feel whoops shame;

A perfectly glandular reprisal, hog-heaven for the fashion-tyrannized I recommend a transplant—rock of the weenies
those bottles will seek their own salvation. Vietnam tastes better: do ten seconds of fake mambo, spawn a tress shit
sticky history of perfection. What positions
your rights at the bidet flowering penis choreography, it's supposed to get harder if you're being strangled; why don't you just pest off?

Unleased disposition schemers, this is soup to be defoliated, just the right corporate body as eating roast tractor parts. I'd sell my government, to these men, any day. look for quick profits in communist misfortune. I AM SOMEBODY It's a Fun World friends you to buy their own money Because Politics Stinks, act insecure & put other people at ease. I went from Hegel to Mighty Atom comix
Afro-cubist that mass equals crass dim men pop
a sauce that monsters fault.

The disjunct syntax, semantic shifts, and reflexive language of Tzara's work also anticipate the techniques used by some of the Language poets. From Kit Robinson's "Authority Vespers":

May try industrious lapping at lakeside. Old habit at a glance, but punctilious rails glean rye. All I've ever envisaged careens floorboardward in an imagination of tiles. Try to pry information off fuselage, push raw metal endeavor tied to a post. Tangled organ's were Gorky's parking spot. There's air outside an idea, more space than meets the eye. The pull is furious, flag snap in storm. All along the warm interior of the mouth houses resource. The elevated crash diction completes the image sentence. But behind that these interpolations can never get, the base slides noiselessly under foot, buildings heave into view, and an accelerated procedure takes up the slacks and drapes them over a chair.

The dream-like quality of Robinson's "Authority Vespers" also recalls the work of the French Surrealists. The distinction, formally speaking, between a Dada and a Surreal poem is, of course, a dubious one, especially considering that many of the Dadaists went on to become Surrealists. The distinction is one of emphasis: whereas Tzara insisted that "If there is a system in the lack of system—that of my proportions—I never apply it" ("Manifesto of mr. aa," 85), André Breton, the leader of Surrealism, insisted on systematizing the techniques and assumptions of Dada, shifting the school's emphasis from nihilism to surrealism. Breton justifies the shift as follows:

Postwar disorder, a state of mind essentially anarchic that guided that cycle's many manifestations, a deliberate refusal to judge—for lack, it was said, of criteria—the actual qualifications of the individuals, and, perhaps, in the last analysis, a certain spirit of negation which was making itself conspicuous, had brought about a dissolution of the group (which one might say, from its dispersed and heterogeneous character, was inchoate), whose germinating force has nevertheless been decisive and, by general consent of present-day critics, has greatly influenced the course of ideas. (*What is Surrealism?*, 119–20)

Quite appropriately, the particular direction poetry should then take came to Breton as he was drifting off to sleep one night and a sentence formed in his mind with no clear "trace of any relation whatever to any incidents I may at that time have been involved in . . . : 'A man is cut in half by the window'" (p. 120). Thus the dream, and behind it the Freudian unconscious, became the focal point of Surrealism. The poetic challenge to logic was carried out no

longer in the name of meaninglessness but now in the name of supreme meaning, *sur*-realism. "We still live under the reign of logic," Breton claimed. "But the methods of logic are applied nowadays only to the resolution of problems of secondary interest. . . . It is only by what seems pure chance that there has recently been brought to light an aspect of mental life—to my belief by far the most important—with which it was supposed we no longer had any concern. Credit for these discoveries must go to Freud" (p. 124).

The poet of the Language school to follow this lead most closely is Nick Piombino, a practicing psychoanalyst. In "Writing and Free Association" ($L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ 1, 1 [February 1978]), he identifies "automatic writing" with an attempt "to read, write, and understand poetry that directs attention to the *totality* of the thinking process." Poetry, then, provides an approach to the state of mind in which, according to Breton, "life and death, the real and the imaginary, the high and the low, are not perceived as contradictions" (*What Is Surrealism?*, 129). Piombino continues:

Like the sequential motifs in dreams, a poem's meaning often appears to be more verbal than literal, resonating with meaning rather than describing it. Sometimes sequences in poems (and dreams and thoughts) can be drawn together like fragments in a collage, to open another implied area not yet found. What is before can become what is next (to). For example, in writing poetry the very next thought may seem technically unacceptable but allowed to remain in the poem may reveal an otherwise hidden intention.

Piombino's statements above aptly describe the Surrealist focus on the sequence of motifs, the drift from image to image which "may reveal an otherwise hidden intention" or unity. But Piombino's emphasis, as he later explains in "Writing and Experiencing," is on the "relationship of this (the problem of the human relationship to space, matter, and time) to the appeal of *density*, or rapid experiences of strong emotional impact directly juxtaposed against the material facticity of language" (*LB*, 71). The image as Breton saw it transcends the medium of presentation, language, and in fact passes wholly through translation from one language to another. Language does not escape so easily from view, however, for Piombino. Writing, "like a forgotten ruin or monument, . . . continues to haunt us in its facticity as object" and enters into "paradoxical relationships to memory (invested in the image)" (*LB*, 72). The mutability of the image due to the endless possibilities of linguistic manifestations makes language "the enemy of the state and historicity because of its power to germinate systems antithetical to custom because custom is partly dependent on coded laws." The ambiguity of signification foregrounded in poetry thus challenges the hegemonic paradigms of experience.

The role of the "material facticity of language" distinguishes Piombino's poetry from Breton's. A look at the process and function of image shifts in both a Breton poem and a Piombino one should illustrate this difference. Breton:

At the hour of love and blue eyelids
I see myself burning in turn I see that solemn hidingplace of
nothings
That was my body
Probed by the patient beak of the fire-ibis
When it is finished I enter into the invisible ark
Paying no attention to the passers-by of life whose dragging
footsteps echo in the distance
I see the ridges of the sun

(*Selected Poems*, 63)

Piombino:

Modelled after an aolde method of practice
Memory, spliced from itself, the smile
The possibilities. The list, the account,
Positive attitude, now rise: what if
The furniture, the couch is \$800, and
Don't ask, slips past the diamonds, this
Copied from an old format, brush stroked,
The wood veneer, the bicycle, marginal stories,
The opening is a disclosure, the spreading fan
And, pumping hard, an explosion, the best is possible,
So that four degrees, the earth tilting,
A visual gyre, that is, circling around the cameraman
Spots crevices in the apparent surface,
A recording of mute repetitions lying beneath
X speech. Cancel, amour, follows closely.
And writ large: CAMEL, obscure ("that's right!")
Applied, approved, method of practice:
No repetitions please, penitent, that you have to follow
Time to continue. . . .

(*Poems*, 14)

Certainly there is a fluidity of imagery in Piombino's poem. But the shifts are due to a protean language which breaks down, changing syntactical and grammatical patterns before the sentence can state anything clearly. The reader's attention is drawn immediately to the linguistic level of the poem by the unusual use of "aolde" and the reflexive statement in the first line which foregrounds the poem at the level of "method of practice." "Modelled" demands a referent from the independent clause which should (but doesn't) follow, but is "Memory" that referent? The next modifying phrase, "spliced from itself," also hangs without a referent: From itself to what? Nevertheless, though grammatically incomplete, the phrase and the entire "sentence" unit do make sense within the film metaphor, seen as various phrases spliced together in jump cuts, parataxis undercutting the hypotaxis implied by the phrases. What follows, however, is no simple collage. Instead of a series of

images, Piombino presents a series of conflicting grammatical units and reflexive statements: "Applied, approved, method of practice:/ No repetitions please. . . ."

Barrett Watten sees his own practice as an extension of Surrealism, but he is drawn more to the social role that Breton carved out for himself than to any specific set of aesthetic or psychological assumptions. For instance, Watten rejects any notion of an unconscious or the inherent value of free association (see "Watten Interview"), but he endorses Breton's attempt to create a life in which poetry and politics are one.

The "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" (1938), written by Breton and Leon Trotsky, proclaims:

True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time—true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. (*What Is Surrealism?*, 184)

At a time when Soviet Communism and European Fascism were stamping out intellectual dissent, any art that fostered intellectual development, Breton and Trotsky claimed, necessarily furthered the mental and consequently the political liberation of humanity. For Breton, as Watten points out, the self or "single artist, is becoming the locus of a collective voice" (*Total Syntax*, 39). The single artist's identification with "exterior fact" (for Breton, the revolutionary movements of the 1930s) through his or her adoption of a consciously revolutionary role becomes the paradigm of artistic posture or "method" for Watten: "The test of a 'politics of poetry' is in the entry of poetry into the world in a political way" ($L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ 4 [Winter 1982]: 129).

Recognizing that the social conditions which offered Breton the opportunity for such an identification have long been gone, Watten sees the need for today's poet to approach the self in poetry reflexively, the self no longer in the position to be the "locus of a collective voice." What does this look like in practice? Watten attempts to clarify this in his discussion of Kit Robinson's poem, "In the American Tree":

. . . although the landscape is mutating, the driver is always in control of the car. The attention is directed to the progression in the poem, and the image content is undercut and distanced by that fact. Illusion comes with a tag. The transformation in Robinson's poem is not the coming into being of the image but of something even deeper—the perception of mind in control of its language. Distance, rather than absorption, is the intended effect. (*Total Syntax*, 64)

Despite the disjunct and random appearance of much Language poetry, control remains central for Watten.

Control in the midst of chaos was also central for the Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky, another significant model for the Language school. In "Notes for

Echo Lake 3" Michael Palmer eulogizes Zukofsky's death. Palmer's poem is a meditation on the aesthetics of Zukofsky:

The letters of the words of our legs and arms. What he had seen or thought he'd seen within the eye, voices overheard rising and falling. And if each conversation has no end, then composition is a placing beside or with and is endless, broken threads of cloud driven from the west by afternoon wind. (*Notes for Echo Lake*, 16)

The reference is predominantly to Zukofsky's 1930 essay, "An Objective," in which he outlined the requirements for Objectivist poetry. The essay opens with the optical definition of an Objective: "The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus" (*Prepositions*, 20). Zukofsky wanted a writing "which is the detail, not the mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody" (p. 20). Poets should not waste their time on the imprecision of metaphor and useless words used only to complete a metric pattern; nor should they subordinate poetry to something else (such as philosophy or politics). Poets instead should focus on an array of individual objects and should structure those objects into a "rested totality"—the poem itself seen as an object thoroughly organized like a musical composition. Here we see once again a poet emphasizing the material object-status of the word and downplaying its referential role—Palmer's "The letters of the words of . . ."—although Zukofsky insists that the sign be used "outside as well as within the context [of the poem] with communicative reference" (p. 24). Zukofsky chose his A-7 to represent his Objectivist work in the *Objectivist Anthology* he edited in 1930:

Horses: who will do it? out of manes? Words
Will do it, out of manes, out of airs, but
They have no manes, so there are no airs, birds
Of words, from me to them no singing gut.
For they have no eyes, for their legs are wood,
For their stomachs are logs with print on them;
Blood red, red lamps hang from necks or where could
Be necks, two legs stand A, four together M.
"Street Closed" is what print says on their stomachs;
That cuts out everybody but the diggers;
You're cut out, and she's cut out, and the jiggers
Are cut out. No! we can't have such nor bucks
As won't, tho they're not here, pass thru a hoop
Strayed on a manhole—me? Am on a stoop.

(p. 39)

As critic Hugh Kenner points out, A-7 is made up of seven sonnets, each with an ababcdcd octave, this one with a sestet of effegg. "The diction, the rhythms, the objects handled, are comically inappropriate to these Renaissance formalisms, and the dexterity with which forms mutate make the

clumsy words and objects tumble as though weightless through an intricate juggling act . . . precisely as in music, where there isn't a burden of 'meaning' and playing can seem like play" ("Two Pieces on 'A,'" 190). I would argue, however, that playing isn't only play in this movement: a tension mounts even within the first sonnet between the words that play and the words that say. "Street Closed" is not only a physical object pasted to the wooden belly of a sawhorse but also a sign of exclusion. Those who work are protected from those who do not. The jiggers are "cut out" from the work area, left idle on the stoop during the height of the Great Depression. Zukofsky's isolation of the material word is not simply an aesthetician's game; it is an exploration of the power of words and the structures that order those words. The ideal order, as we have seen, is music. But here there is "from me to them no singing gut."

What distinguishes Zukofsky's exploration of the word from that of many Language poets is the locus of attention of each. Zukofsky focuses on the shaping power of perception, the human ability to string a series of objects together into a meaningful whole. But his interest in perception is not epistemological—"I don't care how you think about things, whether you think they are outside you, even if you disappear, or if they exist only because you think of them" ("Sincerity and Objectification," 266). Zukofsky is concerned with the practical necessity of shaping the flux outside us; while scientists grapple with the "problem of infinity," the good poet "integrates any human emotion, any discourse, into an order of words that exists as another created thing in the world, to affect it and be judged by it" (*Prepositions*, 28).

The locus of attention of many Language poets, however, is extended out beyond the horizon of the mind's act of ordering to the ordering of that mind itself. The focus is now on the ideological framing of perception. Zukofsky seemed to take for granted that anyone could learn to focus his or her attention on an object and then see it clearly, see it just as anyone else would see it. All that was needed was a disciplined mind. But "All meaning is a construct," Silliman writes, "built from the determinate code of language" ("If by 'Writing,'" 168), those language codes in turn determined within a particular social formation. Foregrounding the signifier's materiality for Silliman grows not out of a desire to impose order on flux but to show all such orderly impositions as historically relative. We "are initiated by language into a (the) world," explains Charles Bernstein, "and we see and understand the world through the terms and meanings that come into play in this acculturation, a coming into culture where culture is the form of community, of a collectivity" (*LB*, 60). Even Watten, who in his call for order and organization through the self's "identification with its objects" (*Total Syntax*, 59) seems quite Zukofskian, expands that horizon by insisting also that the "objects and contexts of art are relative and continuous" (p. 66).

So far I have been discussing relatively distant precursors whose works in one way or another resemble that of many of the Language poets, and whose

names come up quite often in the critical writings and discussions of the latter. But the most immediate and influential poetic context out of which Language poetry has developed is what since 1960 has been called "The New American Poetry." It was in that year Donald Allen published *The New American Poetry* anthology, which presented to a wide audience the work of poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley (from the so-called Black Mountain school) and John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O'Hara from the New York School, as well as Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and many others. The one common characteristic of the forty-four poets represented in the anthology, Allen explains in the preface, is their "total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse" (qualities I will soon discuss). "They are our true avant-garde," Allen continues, "the true containers of the modern movement in American poetry."

The poet who set the tone for the poetry and poetics of the New American poetry was Charles Olson. It is in his essay "Projective Verse" (1950) that the lines are drawn between those working out of the tradition of Pound and Williams and those perpetuating the "claustrophobic" tradition of academic verse. Academic verse—"The Non-Projective," the "verse which print bred"—is "closed" verse, characterized by a concentration on the poet's ego, and a reliance on the metrical line, the stanza, logical argument, description, hypotactic syntax, and conventional grammar. Such writing does not engage the objects of the world; it only examines them.

In contrast, projective verse, or "what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD," is open verse. The poem should be seen not as a series of lines tacked to the left margin but as an open field into which the poet ventures, putting "himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself" ("Projective Verse," 148). As we can see here, Olson is resurrecting the organicism of the Romantic poets as a weapon against the new classicism of non-projective verse. Following Ernest Fenellosa and Ezra Pound, Olson sees the poem as "a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge" from the poet to the reader. Here is one sense of the term "projective": the projection of energy, which Olson identifies as "the kinetics of the thing" (p. 148). Traditional meter and rhyme patterns will drain energy rather than discharge it.

But Olson recognizes that simply putting himself in the open will not guarantee that energy-transfer. There is still at least one principle to be followed if random chaos or flat, drab poems are to be avoided: "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." But what does this mean in practice? Olson's third point is "the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. I think it can be boiled down to one statement . . . : ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (pp. 148–49). Now the poem is projective in the sense that there is a constant shifting of images, voices, and contexts. From Olson's "The Kingfishers":

I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said
la lumiere"

but the kingfisher
de l'aurore"
but the kingfisher flew west
est devant nous!"

he got the color of his breast
from the heat of the setting sun!

The features are, the feebleness of the feet (syndactylism of the 3rd & 4th digit)
the bill, serrated, sometimes a pronounced beak, the wings
where the color is, short and round, the tail
inconspicuous.

But not these things are the factors. Not the birds.
The legends are
legends. Dead, hung up indoors, the kingfisher
will not indicate a favoring wind,
or avert the thunderbolt. Nor, by its nesting,
still the waters, with the new year,
for seven days.

It is true, it does nest with the opening year,
but not on the waters.

It nests at the end of a tunnel bored by itself in a bank. There,
six or eight white and translucent eggs are laid, on fishbones
not on bare clay, on bones thrown up in pellets by the birds.

On these rejectamenta

(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born.
And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes
a dripping, fetid mass

Mao concluded:

nous devons
nous lever
et agir!

(pp. 2-3)

For Olson such open form on the page was not intended solely as a visual shift from the left margin but also as a score for performance. Each line is a measure of breath rather than a certain number of metric feet; each space is a measured rest scored so as to return poetry to "its producer and reproducer, the voice, . . . its place of origin *and* its destination" (p. 153). It is through speech that the person, in combining breath and ear, takes his or her place among the objects of the world. If the poet "chooses to speak from these roots [breath, sound, language, then he] works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size" (p. 156).

Perhaps more than anyone else, Silliman has made the most coherent

attempt to place Language poetry in a line extending from the Projectivist poets. Such an extension, however, is not always clear even in Silliman's writings. As we shall see, while he does make clear where Language writing departs from the pronouncements in "Projective Verse," Silliman's claims for extending the Black Mountain tradition in the name of its "higher principles" are never really explained. He does write that much contemporary poetry—not simply Language poetry—grows out of Projectivism, and one must assume that by this Silliman means in part that Olson, Duncan, and Creeley set the tone for how non-academic poetry would be discussed in the following decades. Any poet in recent years, then, will most likely have chosen either to work in or against the Black Mountain frame. More specifically, however, one can see Language writing as continuing the emphasis on "open" verse, what Duncan has called opening the field. If projective verse was dedicated to expanding the possibilities for poetry in a time when the lyric form, examined by New Critical standards, seemed to many to have exhausted itself—Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" supposedly revealing the decadence inherent from the start in the emphasis on the self—then Language poetry continues that opening of the possibilities of verse at a point when Projectivist assumptions themselves in turn appear to have reached a dead end.

One can see another general influence, furthermore, in Black Mountain's establishment of a close-knit poetic community in which poets worked together in developing the possibilities of a poetic tradition without the support of the academic world. While the Black Mountain community itself has virtually disappeared, the Language communities of San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and New York City have created an extensive communications network for sharing their work and ideas.

The Language school's departure from Black Mountain, as I have suggested, is much more obvious in the critical writings of the former. Silliman claims that Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten, in their editing of *This* magazine beginning in 1971, provided the possibility (the necessity) of an articulation of the limits of Black Mountain poetics. It "was the particular contribution of *This*, in rejecting a speech-based poetics and consciously raising the issue of reference, to suggest that any new direction would require poets to look (in some ways for the first time) at what a poem is actually made of—not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or in one's mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself" (*In the American Tree*, xvi).

In the work of Clark Coolidge, Silliman explains elsewhere, such writing in language "meant freeing words from whatever context forced them to be less than themselves" ("Ubeity," 19), a claim reminiscent of Khlebnikov's call for "the word as such." Like Zukofsky's, Coolidge's work approaches the condition of music. But Coolidge's music is Bop, not Bach. "In Bop," Coolidge writes, "especially in its drums which almost purely color and are

colored by time itself, there is the sense that sheer continuance gets articulated" ("A Note on Bop"). Coolidge's is the music of process, not of control. From *The Maintains*:

for the fade use of smart mined mode
firmly in fast by act do another
plaster link phrase to protozoa
hawser of tie adipose
wealth spun ant lean
tire vessel top score
flag hind such as vole
interval side in such field more
gottlieb blenny

(*The Maintains*, 70)

In addition to Coolidge's attention to rhythm, we can see here again the emphasis on the material quality of the word which he shares with Zukofsky. But not all Language poets share this particular way of focusing on the medium itself. In "Notes on Coolidge, Objectives, Zukofsky, Romanticism, and &" Robert Grenier responds to Zukofsky's and Coolidge's efforts to make works into objects: "Ouch. Paint is paint. What a circle" (p. 17). Although Grenier himself explores the material side of words—especially sound—his purpose is not to separate the word from meaning but to examine how the particular material word (versus its supposed synonym) influences and enhances meaning:

Again, question of *how* words further perception, act in same place same time as mind's experience of objects in situation, like a third party (a sentence) tells & shows you what's happening. Language as operationally interactive definition, or some such, but that's my need. (pp. 18–19)

Awareness of such a concern helps one to explain Grenier's fascination with minimal semantic units, resonating with meaning potential, as in the following poem from *A Day at the Beach* (1984):

VOICE SAYS
v o i c e s

Such a poem depends on the printed page, for we most likely would fail to distinguish between these homophones when spoken. Ironically, then, the ambiguity of the heard meaning colors what is said, the voice being not capable of speaking clearly about itself. Furthermore, we could not distinguish between the uppercase line and the underlined lowercase one, both exhibiting graphemic devices implying a vocal stress—stress itself being

meaningless in the absence of other non-stressed terms. One would be hard put to devise a more thorough challenge to the Projectivist valorization of speech.

Grenier also insists on the influence that his Selectric typewriter has on the meaning of the poem, giving each letter equal space versus the n-space, m-space, and so on of the printing press. "Type is like a window," Grenier claims. "The shape of the world is contributed to by the language forms we have made. . . . The results gained come from a reformulation of letter values. Rearranging letters is alchemy" ("Typewriter vs. Typeface," 7). Olson's composition by field is put to use with a vengeance, no longer as a score for voice but as a visual artifact whose "meaning," like that of any visual art, exists on the page itself. The page *is* the field. (I should concede here that the same is true for some of Olson's later work. See especially *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three*, pp. 104 and 121.)

Another major New American influence on certain Language poets is the New York School, especially John Ashbery. The most influential Ashbery text is *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), which critic Harold Bloom has called "the outrageously disjunctive volume," flawed because Ashbery "attempted too massive a swerve away from the ruminative continuities of Stevens and Whitman" ("John Ashbery," 111). But it is precisely the book's swerve from rumination and continuity that makes it such an important model for contemporary poets. These qualities are evident in the poem "White Roses":

The worst side of it all—
The white sunlight on the polished floor—
Pressed into service,
And then the window closed
And the night ends and begins again.
Her face goes green, her eyes are green,
In the dark corner playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever." I try to
describe for you,
But you will not listen, you are like the swan.

Of the Language poets, Andrews has written perhaps the most extensive critical response to *The Tennis Court Oath*. In "Misrepresentation" (*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 12 [1980]) Andrews claims that Ashbery's book "poses for us a radical questioning of established forms, yet at the same time, and so appropriately in its own form, it explores the implications of that questioning—not as an idea, but as an experience and a *reading*." The work demands, in other words, "Behavioral reading, rather than hermeneutic ones." Through his "convulsed" syntax, his "jagged kaleidoscope" of images, and his interruptions of tone, Ashbery questions language's ability to represent as well as our desire to represent, our need to expose the world and

ourselves in the light of day. "I try to/ describe for you," Ashbery writes, but he recognizes that "no stars are there/ No stripes,/ But a blind man's cane poking. . . ." Once one has recognized the inherent opacity of the word, the social contract behind its supposed transparency, "it makes sense to be skeptical, to embody in *composition* the doubt that transparency is more than a devious & second-best fraud, fraught with an illusory naturalism, a making into nature what is really our *production*." The answer is not, however, to give up on language and meaning—why write if such were the case?—but to put forward a writing of self-conscious production that recognizes the arbitrary but necessary choices behind what we determine as "truth."

Charles Bernstein is one contemporary poet to benefit from Ashbery's "swerve" from Stevens and Whitman (if it is a swerve—one could possibly argue for a disruption of ruminative continuity even in parts of their work.) Andrews's discussion of *The Tennis Court Oath*, for instance, applies equally well to many poems in Bernstein's *Controlling Interests* (1980). From "Matters of Policy":

On a broad plain in a universe of
anterooms, making signals in the dark, you
fall down on your waistband &, carrying your
own plate, a last serving, set out for
another glimpse of a gaze. In a room
full of kids splintering like gas jets against
shadows of tropical taxis—he really had, I
should be sorry, I think this is the ("I
know I have complained" "I am quite well"
"quit nudging")—croissants
outshine absinthe as "la plus, plus sans
egal" though what I most care about
is another sip of my Pepsi-Cola. Miners
tell me about the day, like a pack of
cards, her girlfriend split for Toronto. . . .

(p. 1)

The disjunct syntax, the incomplete statements, and the radical shifts of imagery all recall Ashbery's early work. But what does not occur in "Matters of Policy" is the tortured meditation on perception and representation. Such questioning has been digested during the fifteen or so years intervening between "White Roses" and Bernstein's poem. The essential insight of Ashbery's work—the social production of meaning—now becomes the dominant focus, enlisted in an examination of the politics of the use of language. Irony is posed in Bernstein's work not just as a questioning of language but as a guard against ideological contamination.

In "Misrepresentation" Andrews sees Ashbery's work as the germ for "an Ideologicritik, and a critique of clarity and transparency and language . . . ; and hierarchy arising historically at the same time as instrumental literacy (Levi-Strauss) or the incest taboo." The notion of poetry as ideology critique, as a specific mode of ideological struggle, associates much Language poetry with the various avant-garde manifestations which occurred earlier in this century. It is to that question that I turn in the next chapter.