

## Ideological Struggle and the Possibility of an Oppositional Poetic Practice

One of the crucial issues in discussions of Louis Althusser's conception of ideology is the problem of functionalism. At the heart of this issue is the question of agency, in particular the possibility of an opposition within and the revolutionary transformation of a given mode of production. The story is that Althusser has conceptualized the relationship between ideology and the reproduction of the relations of production in such a way that the possibility of opposition or revolution is denied; once a mode of production is established and begins interpellating subjects through its Ideological State Apparatuses, there is no release valve in Althusser's conceptual machine that provides for the death of a mode of production. There is no way to account for the arrival in society of oppositional forces which seek to criticize the status quo and to think their way through to more egalitarian relations of production—oppositional forces such as some of the so-called Language poets.

Or so the story goes. We are speaking, of course, of a reading of Althusser's celebrated text "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (*Lenin and Philosophy*, 127–86; hereafter cited as *Lenin*). We are speaking, furthermore, of the very question of reading itself in regards to the writer of *Reading Capital* (Althusser), for whom "ideology" is a process of writing the world so as to provide certain readings of that world, and for whom "science"—or rather "scientific practice"—is a reading of that reading/writing/constitution of the "real." When Althusser talks about ideology as a "representation" of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence (*Lenin*, 162), he presents us with a process of textualization. In this light a given social formation is thus the site of inscription; the subject is a text. Which brings me to three separate but related points:

1. Those who argue that Althusser's conception of the reproduction of the relations of production depends on a functionalist view of the role of ideology thus argue that Althusser presents us with a closed text, written once and for all. But I will argue that Althusser's notion of social formation, even in his essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), provides us with an antidote to such a functionalist reading of ideology.

2. The notion of ideology as textualization offers a bridge between Marxist ideology critique and Derrida's notion of dissemination, as Thomas E. Lewis has pointed out in "Reference and Dissemination: Althusser After Derrida." If discussions of ideology are also discussions of representation, then Marxism cannot afford to ignore the developments in contemporary theories of reading/writing for, as Fredric Jameson claims, the "kind of decipherment of which literary and textual criticism is in many ways the strong form" serves as the model for the very analytic practice put forward by Althusser (*The Political Unconscious*, 296).

3. I argue furthermore that the conception of reading as the constitution of its object—in other words, the writing of that object—points to a conception of literary practice not just as the object of criticism but as a mode of intervention in ideological struggle. When that practice becomes conscious of itself as a practice *as such* (when it becomes a "scientific practice," as Althusser would say), then that literary practice may serve as a mode of ideology critique on a par with theoretical practice. The poetic practice I have in mind is that of some Language poets today.

My thesis is that Althusser's conception of ideology as a writing and framing of our social relations provides not simply a functional analysis of the conceptual limits imposed by particular ideologies—although it does provide that—but also a glimpse of the possibilities for opposition within any ideological formation. In other words, rather than denying the political effectivity of any and all oppositional practices, Althusser's ISA essay shows how practices such as Language poetry can come about despite the power of the hegemonic modes of ideological interpellation.

I begin with a reading of the ISA essay. It is extremely hard, Althusser claims, "to raise oneself to the *point of view of reproduction*. Nevertheless, everything outside this point of view remains abstract (worse than one-sided: distorted)—even at the level of production, and, *a fortiori*, at that of mere practice" (*Lenin*, 128; his emphasis). *Mere practice* at the level of production: such is the focus of empiricist studies. What such a focus leaves out of view is the "endless chain" (p. 129) of the relations between production, consumption, and the realization of surplus value which are necessary for the reproduction of the forces of production (the *forces* and the *relations* of production making up the conditions of production). The production process, consequently, cannot be viewed as autotelic (existing solely at the level of the company) but as a "global," endless metonymic chain of relations within the social formation. I insist on repeating the term "social formation" here because such a conception continually qualifies any attempt to focus solely on the concept of "mode of production." The social formation in Althusser's work is not seen as the *expression* of the dominant mode of production but as the greater or lesser structural qualification of that dominant mode. At the risk of offending my readers, I wish to point out—as if it were not already pointed out in the many readings of Althusser—that Althusser's conception of struc-

ture in dominance is not that of a closed system, an impenetrable fortress with no egress, but that of a complex and conflictual articulation of competing modes of production. Althusser's own conception of structural causality does not allow for the purely functionalist notion of ideology attributed to him. But this remains to be seen.

Althusser discusses this conception of structural causality, of course, in *Reading Capital*:

The structure is not an essence *outside* the economic phenomena which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause, *absent because outside them*. The absence of the cause in the structure's "metonymic causality" on its effects is not the fault of the exteriority of the structure with respect to the economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the very form of the structure, as a structure, in its effects. This implies therefore that the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that *the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects. (p. 188-89; italics in original)

The nature of that specific combination of the structure's peculiar elements is metonymy. In a note we read that "metonymic causality" is an "expression Jacques-Alain Miller has introduced to characterize a form of structural causality registered in Freud by Jacques Lacan" (p. 188), referring to Freud's notion of the process of displacement of psychic forces in the unconscious. Metonymy, then, is not simply a relationship of contiguity (a static system of elements sitting idly beside one another) but a process of displacement of elements along the relational chain. The notion of metonymic causality is a way of registering the immanence, in other words, of class struggle within the structure itself.

In his ISA essay Althusser argues that:

the Ideological Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle. The class (or class alliance) in power cannot lay down the law in the ISAs as easily as it can in the (repressive) State Apparatuses, not only because the former ruling classes are able to retain strong positions there for a long time, but also because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle. (p. 147; italics in original)

The ISAs themselves—those material loci of ideological interpellation—are not homogeneous spaces of unadulterated indoctrination but instead contradictory articulations of various class (and nonclass) discourses. They are "multiple, distinct, 'relatively autonomous' and capable of providing an

objective field to contradictions which express, *in forms which may be limited or extreme*, the effects of the clashes between the capitalist class struggle and the proletarian class struggle, as well as their subordinate forms" (p. 149; italics mine). We can see here that behind the central question of how the reproduction of the relations of production is secured is the very real possibility that it *might not be secured*. Although the ideological field often is like a "concert . . . dominated by a single score" (the ruling ideology), it nevertheless is "occasionally disturbed by contradictions" (the residual influence of former ruling classes as well as the nascent influence of the emergent class) (p. 154).

What this means, I would suggest, is that Althusser's conception of the ISAs, far from denying the possibility of opposition, is inscribed throughout with opposition. If, as Etienne Balibar suggests, Althusser's work "confirms that *the category of practice is the fundamental category* of the materialist dialectic" ("From Bachelard to Althusser," 225; italics in original), then how is it that his work can be read as a theory which denies oppositional practice? One possibility is that some readers have failed to a greater or lesser degree to distinguish between Althusser's discussions of *particular ideologies* and of *ideology in general*. For instance, Thomas Lewis writes:

Now, if these functions [of the ideological reproduction of the relations of production] are construed as completely determinant of their concepts, and if these concepts are articulated in a relation of correspondence to one another, then the concept of "mode of production" must be seen as designating an *eternal structure*. That is, once it is conceived that productive forces and relations "correspond" and that they functionally reproduce themselves in this relation of correspondence, it becomes impossible to theorize any conditions under which something on the order of a "transitional" phase of "noncorrespondence" can occur. This means, of course, not only that no account can be rendered of past historical change, but also that no strategy can be calculated for promoting future historical change; it also explains why the issue of functionalism is so important for Marxist theory today. ("Reference," 51; italics in original)

Yes, *if* these functions are construed as completely determinant and *if* these concepts are articulated in a relation of correspondence to one another. But as Althusser has insisted time and again, these functions are determinant not completely but in the last instance. And the relation between the forces of production and the relations of production are conceived not as a one-to-one correspondence but as an overdetermined metonymic chain of unevenly developed, relatively autonomous instances. If the ISAs functioned in the way Lewis describes above, then there would be no need whatsoever for the *Repressive State Apparatuses* in Althusser's theory. Why would Althusser bother to discuss "the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc." (*Lenin*, 142-43), if he conceived of a system of automatic reproduction through the ISAs? Furthermore, as Nicos Poulantzas's work attests, the Althusserian conception of "mode of production" is an

abstraction from the interdeterminate articulation of various modes of production existing simultaneously within any given social formation. Althusser's discussion of mode of production and relations of production takes place within his discussion of ideology in general, a pure and abstract concept that must be substituted by talk of particular ideologies when we speak of specific practices.

Let me stretch this point further: even in his discussion of ideology in general, Althusser provides for the possibility of oppositional practice. All "*ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (p. 173; italics in original). These subjects "are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs" (p. 181). The ISAs determine who it is we recognize in "the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself" (p. 181). Thus:

caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as subjects, of subjection to the Subject, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee, the subjects "work", they "work by themselves" in the vast majority of cases, *with the exception of the "bad subjects" who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus.* (p. 181; italics mine)

If individuals are always subjects within certain ideological configurations even before birth, then what makes these bad subjects possible? In his post-script Althusser answers this question:

the ISAs are not the realization of ideology *in general*, nor even the conflict-free realization of the ideology of the ruling class. The ideology of the ruling class does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God, nor even by virtue of the seizure of State power alone. It is by the installation of the ISAs in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology. But this installation is not achieved all by itself; on the contrary, it is the stake in a very bitter and continuous class struggle: first against the former ruling classes and their positions in the old and new ISAs, then against the exploited class. (p. 184-85)

We may now enumerate some reasons why the multiple subjects in a given social formation are not all simply clones from some master model of the dominant ideology. (1) If a mode of production is seen as creating the conditions for related ideological modes whose function is to interpellate subjects to fit the dominant relations of production, then the concept of social formation allows us to conceive a structure of varying ideological determinants. The existence of various positions within this ideological configuration provides for the possibility of differing modes of interpellation which are more or less determined—unified—by the dominant ideology. (2) Each ISA is marked internally by class struggle and thus contains within itself the possibility of dysfunction. And (3) the particular nature of the ISAs—familial,

religious, educational, etc.—provides for the possibility of nonclass determinations in the interpellation of subjects.

While the function of the dominant ideology is to unify the heterogeneous determinations of the different ISAs—"despite its diversity and contradictions," Althusser claims—that unity is subject to the shifting relationship of forces which results from class and nonclass struggles. (Since Althusser does not deal directly with nonclass determinants, I am depending on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe for this insight. Laclau: "This unity can, of course, be disarticulated and recomposed by other discourses. In this sense, the subjectivity of the social agents as such is constantly changing because it's not a homogeneous subjectivity but a constantly recreated unity depending on the whole relation of forces in a society at a given moment" ["Recasting Marxism," 100].)

In a different vocabulary, what we are talking about here is dissemination. And Laclau's use of the term "discourse" provides for a convenient shift from a discussion of the subject to one of the politics of language. For, due to a happy reversal, the explanatory power of the linguistic model for a conception of politics also offers a political model for a conception of language. And here I can do no better than summarize Lewis's important discussion in "Reference and Dissemination." I begin with a quotation:

. . . if it is once allowed that conflict (and, hence, domination) may occur in the social use of signs (it is clear that Derrida allows this), it no longer can be claimed that the value of signs are equally unsecured (it seems to me that sometimes Derrida claims this and sometimes not). In this respect, some deconstructionists purchase alleged grounds for epistemological uncertainty precisely at the cost of obscuring the role of social power in the process of fixing and disseminating references. (p. 40)

Reference, then, is to be seen as the result of a conflictual social process in which various interests compete with one another in order to assign particular values to particular signs. While in the abstract we can agree with Saussure that signification is due to the value accorded to a term in the differential environment of language, Lewis suggests that we must go on to ask where that value itself comes from. The answer lies in part in Umberto Eco's insight that "the referent of a term can only be a *cultural unit*" (*A Theory of Semiotics*, 68). These cultural units, furthermore, draw their value from their placement within language's "multidimensional network of metonymies, each of which is explained by a cultural convention rather than by an original resemblance" (*The Role of the Reader*, 78). Reference results not from a one-to-one correspondence between a concept and a thing but through the culturally determined placement and displacement of the concept along a metonymic chain of sign functions. And the same is true for metaphor: a metaphor does not simply substitute one concept for another according to a scheme of resemblance; the terms sit in adjacent chains. Metaphor, then, is the effect of

a rapid displacement of intermediary terms which connect one chain with the other. Metaphor, in other words, is an effect of metonymy. Reference and metaphor occur because of a metonymic displacement of frames, a process Derrida refers to as dissemination.

What has all this to do with politics? Lewis writes, "What is at stake in the program of dissemination, then, is the exact possibility of *consuming* cultural products in an effectively *different* way . . . [through a process which] works on the basis of elaborating new metonymical relations between texts by shifting the contexts that enable such texts to acquire references" (p. 54). The social context we are speaking of here (to return briefly to Althusser's ISA essay) is the class struggle. The class which gains control over the process of dissemination—the class which succeeds in securing the reference of concepts in a way that best serves its interests—is the class with the ruling ideology. Using Althusser's terminology from *For Marx* this process could be described as the epistemological break (Derrida's "scission") which establishes the substitution of one problematic for another.

I wish to sum up this portion of my discussion with two more quotations from Lewis before turning to the practice of some Language poets:

If it is remembered that Althusser separates the object of knowledge from the real object and that he views the validity of a theoretical discourse as a function of its discursive systemization and effectivity, then what these passages convey is precisely an understanding of concepts as "tropic-concepts," that is, as discursive operations that provisionally enable one to accomplish specific tasks by activating various series of metonymical chains in and for specific circumstances. (p. 50)

I believe that Althusser—in his heart of hearts, of course—generally considers not only that concepts are metaphors in and for theory but also that concepts are to be understood as operating metonymically so as to move the users of concepts along specific interpretant chains in order that they may arrive at a specific place and perform a specific act. . . . (p. 49)

So how can a particular poetic practice serve as an ideology critique? We first must define ideology critique as a mode of investigation. Fredric Jameson refers to this mode as Marxism's "negative hermeneutic," dramatically exemplified by Walter Benjamin's famous statement that "there is no document of civilization which is not at one and the same time a document of barbarism" (*Political Unconscious*, 286). Jameson explains that such an investigative mode begins with the assumption that:

the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are "managed" and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects. . . . [Nevertheless] this process cannot be grasped as one of sheer violence (the theory of hegemony is explicitly distinguished from control by brute force) nor as one inscribing the appropriate

attitudes upon a blank slate, but must necessarily involve a complex strategy of rhetorical persuasion in which substantial incentives are offered for ideological adherence. (p. 287)

All ideology critique, I should add, is in this sense "functionalist." What would a Marxism look like that did not in one form or another operate according to this negative hermeneutic? It is the "blank slate" conception of ideology mentioned above that is attributed to Althusser's conception of ideology and indeed is "functionalist" in its more restricted sense. But, as I have strived to point out, Althusser's conception should be characterized more as the imposition of frames (problematics) which provide the field of reference for particular terms or impulses. Althusser's notion of symptomatic reading is in this sense the attempt to intuit the frames which accord value (ideological charge) to concepts within them. In this general sense his own practice of ideology critique resembles that put forward by Peter Burger (who in this instance draws on the work of Herbert Marcuse): "When one refers to the function of an individual work, one generally speaks figuratively; for the consequences that one may observe or infer are not primarily a function of its special qualities but rather of the manner which regulates the commerce with works of this kind in a given society or in certain strata or classes of a society. I have chosen the term 'institution of art' to characterize such framing conditions" (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 12).

Some Language poetry must be seen as operating precisely within this mode of attention to the framing conditions of the "institution of art." This poetic practice, of course, does not provide readings of individual works but instead explores the function of frames in general, the process by which "dangerous and protopolitical impulses" tend to be neutralized and subverted within the hegemonic conception of art today. While these poets deny that a particular poetic "style" or mode *a priori* carries any specific political charge, they nevertheless insist that certain modes are more easily appropriated into the dominant ideology than are others. Poetic practice thus must be seen as a form of class struggle.

Language poet Ron Silliman writes for example, in "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World," that "the social function of the language arts, especially the poem, place[s] them in an important position to carry the class struggle for consciousness to the level of consciousness" (*The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, 131; cited hereafter as *LB*). If the sign is "an arena of the class struggle," as V. N. Volosinov suggests (*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 23), then there may be a great deal at stake in a disseminatory practice. Poet Charles Bernstein points out that another part of the answer is a poetry that "bares the frame," as the Russian Formalists would put it. Because our experiences are structured through their syntactical arrangement, a poetry that bares its own construction can serve as a "syn-

tactical exploration of consciousness" (LB, 43). In general, Language poets such as Silliman, Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, and Barrett Watten often structure their poetry so as to draw our attention to the politics of the production of reference, the subject, and the "closed" text.

(This is not to suggest, we should note here, that all those poets labeled as Language poets share a single political position. Watten, for instance, has frequently criticized the notion, so often associated with "Language" writing *per se*, that referential language is reified language. Other poets, such as Robert Grenier and Clark Coolidge, insist on distinguishing their positions not only from the Reference-Equals-Reification argument [to be explained below] but from any form of Marxism whatsoever. Consequently, any analysis of the political tendencies of Language writers has to respect their heterogeneity, and to specify which poet can be associated with which political stance. Furthermore, the political claims of individual poets have varied over the last ten to fifteen years, making it necessary to take such changes into account.)

In "Stray Straws and Straw Men" Bernstein lists the major assumptions behind the complaints against Language poetry. Work such as Silliman's, Bernstein states, "may discomfort those who want a poetry of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily" (LB, 39). Behind such discomfort often is the belief that poetry should be honest, direct, authentic, artless, sincere, spontaneous, expressive, *natural*. In such a view of poetry, Bernstein explains in the introduction to his *Paris Review* anthology, "communication is schematized as a two-way wire with the message shuttling back and forth in blissful ignorance of the (its) transom (read: ideology)"; the message passes between two "terminal points (me→you)." Subjects are simple, meaning exists "out there" waiting to be communicated, and texts should be neutral, natural, transparent. In short, the assumptions behind such poetry, as we shall see, are the basic assumptions of bourgeois subjectivity.

One Language school argument counter to the above is that reference is a form of reification. In the essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" Georg Lukács offers the following definition of reification: "Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (*History and Class Consciousness*, 83). By analogy some Language writers claim that the same process applies to the production of language and poetry. Signifiers here replace the commodity and reference replaces surplus value. Reference is thus to be seen as the end result of the social process of language production, not as the inherent quality of the words themselves. Like Lewis, some Language poets add a Marxist twist to Saussure's theory by insisting that the social context determines which particular signifieds may relate to a given signifier. Ignoring the social relations inscribed within the signifier, then, is analogous to ignor-

ing the social relations within the commodity. "Grammatically centered meaning," poet Steve McCaffery claims, "is meaning realized through a specific mode of temporalization. It is understood as postponed reward at the end (the culmination) of a series of syntagms. It is that fetish in which the sentence completes itself. Meaning is like capital in so far as it extends its law of value to new objects. Like surplus value, meaning is frequently 'achieved' to be reinvested in the extending chain of significations. This is seen quite clearly in classical narrative, where meaning operates as accumulated and accumulative units in the furtherance of 'plot' or 'character development': those elements of representation which lead to a destination outside the domain of the signifier" (LB, 160).

Silliman, again in "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World"—the title referring to the goal of realism, the word's disappearance from consciousness as it draws forth its referent—explains that the language of earlier modes of poetry or of present tribal literatures is "felt," its nonsemantic physical characteristics foregrounded in various ways (rhyme, "nonsense syllables," variant spellings). But attention to the physicality of the medium has increasingly disappeared in Western language over the past two centuries. Silliman writes:

What happens when 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 descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism," the optical illusion in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the nature of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed (deformed) into referentiality. (LB, 125)

Realism's valorization of reference, Silliman claims, obscures the social relationships inhering in the poem and thus contributes to the overall process of reification. It is to the ruling class's benefit that we do not recognize the socially-constructed nature of language, for if we did we might realize that the hegemonic views of reality—such as that commodities are "natural"—are to a certain extent arbitrary and, therefore, open to questioning. Silliman favors a poetry, then, that foregrounds its "gesturality"—the traces of its sociality, its constructedness—and explores the limits of its medium: that is, language.

The following passage from Lyn Hejinian's *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (1978) may illustrate such foregrounding:

we are parting with description  
termed blue may be perfectly blue

goats do have damp noses

that test and now I dine drinking with  
others

adult blue butterfly for a swim with cheerful birds

I suppose we hear a muddle of rhythms in water  
bond vegetables binder thereof for thread  
and no crisp fogs

                                  spice quilt mix  
know shipping pivot  
                                  sprinkle with a little melody  
nor blot past this dot mix  
now for a bit and fog of bath rain

do dot goats

Many poetic assumptions and techniques are called into question here (although not dispensed with): lineation, enjambment, syntax, reference, rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, repetition, point of view, and voice. The first line, for example, comments on the appropriateness of reference, implying that description—the method of realism—is no longer necessary or viable (we do not know which). Without the end punctuation, we read on through the line break, where another question arises: Is the second line a continuation of the first or a discrete unit? The first line may stand by itself as methodological statement, or “termed” may refer back to description. But that possibility is challenged as line two progresses, appearing now as separate from the first, a fragment with no clear connection to the first line. We may read the line as a sentence *in media res*, the beginning and perhaps the end of the sentence seen as erased from view. And what do goats with damp noses have to do with either of the previous lines? Line four provides a possible answer: what is in question here seems to be the possibility of description, whether something called “blue” can be “perfectly blue,” whether we can justify descriptions by recourse to the physical world—touching the goats’ noses and agreeing that they are indeed damp. Line four, then, links these lines provisionally to the theme of proof, of the adequacy of language to match experiences through a series of tests. Those tests rest on social convention, however, proving adequate only insofar as they meet some communal standard. “That test and now I dine drinking with/ others”: the coherence as written here overrides the significance of the enjambment between the “I” and the “other,” the distance that separates the subject from any complete communion with the object except as they are mediated through sociality.

Such a reading, however, seems to break down as the poem continues. Sociality in line five now takes on a sinister sense, the naive butterfly swimming among what seem to be cheerful birds; but if looks prove deceiving—as the previous lines on description suggest—then the butterfly is in trouble. The sixth line shifts to another narrative frame, apparently following through with the water reference of line five. But “bond vegetables binder thereof for thread”? All narrative or thematic coherence between the lines appears to break down here, only to recur fleetingly in “and no crisp fogs,” another comment on description. Unless, of course, “crisp” functions as a noun rather than an adjective, and “fogs” as a verb rather than a noun. The progression of

the poem so far does not privilege such a reading, but neither does it prevent it, especially when we read “spice quilt mix.” Is this a series of nouns? An elliptical command: “[You] spice [the] quilt mix”? Such a grammatical pattern shows up in the next line, “know shipping pivot.” However we choose to read the poem, whatever its thematics, the form of the poem and its demands on the reader force the issue of construction, of language as a conflictual process of arranging material units.

In addition to the critique of common assumptions about reference, much so-called Language poetry also engages in the current debate over the status of the *cogito* or subject. Poetry, then, which functions according to the notion of the poet/speaker as an independent subject who, having “found his voice,” presents a situation seen from a single point of view, fosters the key ideological concept of bourgeois society: the self-sufficient, self-determined individual free to participate in the marketplace. The standard poetic notions of voice, expression, intention, point-of-view, etc., must therefore come under close scrutiny in any materialist poetic. In his book-length poem, *a.k.a.*, Bob Perelman makes such a critique of the subject the content of his work:

I is to other as shopping is to Christmas. An immense pressure to locate the bargains amid the sense of betrayed values. One by one, I took her hand and led her and was carried upstairs. Goodnight thousands of times, until inside and outside have the identical awesome echo. Stories settle down comfortably from interstellar distances. Naturally enough I reach for warmth. No shame in being a rock, a tree, a person inside perspective and thus a bit foreshortened. Ceaseless repetition stimulated chemistry. He ate what was in front of him, swallowing the implications. (p. 24)

In this passage the “I” plays many grammatical roles, none of them being granted any primacy. The I in the first sentence is already in the position of the other, the third person, serving as a noun rather than as a shifter substituting for a speaker. Lacan asks, “Is the place that I occupy as the subject of a signifier concentric or eccentric, in relation to the place I occupy as subject of the signified?” (*Ecrits*, 165). The speaker can only speak of herself through the mediated distance of a word, “I,” and consequently never can unify the I that is spoken of and the I that speaks. Through the economy of desire the self submits to being other in order to be at all. As Michael Palmer has written in correspondence, the imagination can be seen in this context as the manifestation of desire, the force of “dis-placement” that produces not the monad but the heterogeneous (Letter to George Hartley, 6 November 1986).

Perelman, in his talk “The First Person,” associates the traditional “voice” poem—such as William Stafford’s “Travelling Through the Dark”—with the closed text, in which the “poet is firmly in the driver’s seat, ‘I could hear the wilderness,’ and firmly in control of the meaning, ‘I thought hard for us all.’ . . . here, the I is in a privileged position, unaffected by the words” (“The First

Person," 156). Perelman contrasts such a poem with the text which "insists on the reader participating," the open text, which Hejinian defines as follows:

The open text, by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. . . . The open text often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material, turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification. ("The Rejection of Closure," 272)

Hejinian locates the danger of commodification not so much in reference as in the view of the text as product rather than as process. Though it may sound contradictory, the foregrounding of the materiality of the language, the revelation of the word's objecthood (so to speak), draws attention to the process of language, the manipulation of material units within the signifying chain in such a way so as to create meaning. Meaning exists within an active inter-agential process rather than as an object or product existing outside of language, just as value results from a social process rather than from some inherent quality of the object. Such attention is helpful in reading the following passage from Steve Benson's "On Time in Another Place":

They go to a foreign country to have a talk. A forest

for example, Wales, Cambodia, it doesn't matter so long as

givens are posited at an angle oblique enough to their assump-

A woman and her daughter both wear sweaters buttoned  
tions that the situation appeals mostly to their sensations  
halfway up the front, black and navy blue respectively. A  
and their identities are inapparent, up for grabs or subject  
man on a pale green motor-scooter wears a slightly darker,  
to the oblivion of their absorption in the not-there: imagination  
deeper colored sweater of about the same tint. Walking  
memories, possibilities, et cetera. The irrelevancy of such  
between her husband and her young son, a woman whose dress is  
residual impressions, which seem to ride loose bubbles of  
blazoned with broad magenta-pink and green and blue and white  
hot air rising to expel them via speech, disperses them too  
stripes has an unfastened button-down long-sleeved pastel  
easily, whether or not words want to press them to explosion.  
sweater on over it. . . .

The "desire to say," as Hejinian puts it, leads to the superimposition of narratives, the attempt to speak everything at once. Such a writing process

emphasizes the singularity and limitation of narration while acceding to the necessity of narration. The two narratives in Benson's poem continually merge and retract, seeking points of synthesis while rejecting any total synthesis, much as in Benson's book, *Blindspots*. In a review of the latter book Carla Harryman writes, "The blindspots, the words that stand out as holes, 'stress the act.' . . . The possibility of continual transformation inspires insatiable desire. . . . The finesse is that one anticipates the empty spaces will be filled. But Benson, restlessly dissatisfied with his product, the completed detail, constantly alters the way any next thing comes into being. He places his own agility under attack, which psychological strategy encourages the work in its mutations. This too fuels the desiring machine" ("What In Fact Was Originally Improvised," 73).

As we have seen, the work of these poets is in part a reaction against the assumptions about reference, the subject, and textual closure that lie, in their view, behind the dominant poetic discourse. The disjunction, discontinuity, and indeterminacy of many of the poems I have been discussing grow out of a critique of bourgeois ideology which is seen to inform much contemporary poetic practice. But is this enough to challenge the reifying effects of the dominant conceptions about language? Or is this poetic mode itself a sign of reification, its fragmentary form resulting from a rejection of the very social process of meaning-production that these poets claim to foreground? The answer to either question, I would argue, depends more on the social and aesthetic context in which such a poetic mode appears than on any supposed inherent value of the mode itself. "The identification of reference," Watten writes, "and of normative grammar behind that, with the commodification of language might be true in a given time and place. For example, the French bourgeois education Breton received probably approached this kind of social coding. But writers in the present would be lucky to have the lids on that tight" (*Total Syntax*, 54). However tight the lids might now be (or, in other words, however tightly controlled the possibilities of language might be), the important point here is that the political effects of form depend on historical context. While Breton's opening up of poetic form might have been an effective response in the repressive context of early-twentieth century France, the American poet's abandonment of control, Watten suggests, may only contribute to an already anarchic environment with no signs of control from above or from anywhere else. Thus Watten has said, "I don't see that an open text, one that isn't organized around content, doesn't run similar kinds of risks [of creating a power imbalance between writer and reader] in terms of overcoding or blanking out (undercoding)" ("Barrett Watten on Poetry and Politics," 199).

Poet Bruce Andrews's own practice grows out of the desire to lay bare the social coding that shapes our present use of language. Andrews hopes to

extend the production of meaning, not to deny it. Such a position lies behind the following passage from one of his poems:

gaps  
shocks through  
absorbing  
hover  
the subjunctive  
we're  
less  
thoughts

(*Wobbling*, 80)

Even though the standard syntactical patterns and grammatical units are missing here, this poem nevertheless can mean and can be read. Andrews has opened up the possibilities of syntax, allowing the reader to determine the paths she will pursue in combining these words into a meaningful complex. If one were to draw lines from each unit to other units close by, as in a connect-the-dots puzzle, then one might visualize the various possible combinations offered above. In any case, the poem lays bare the device of standard syntax, revealing its arbitrary and socially-determined nature.

Andrews explains this practice of baring the frame as follows:

Laying bare the device remains as a task but it becomes a more social act, of social unbalancing, of a social reflexivity of content, rather than some kind of (what I have called in the past) preppie formalism. Because the modernism that's at stake now is more public and is more involved with the conditions of meaning, it also becomes more social. So that if people are arguing (as some of the post-structuralists seem to) that social meaning has disappeared, then just trying to disrupt the system with some radical formalism isn't going to be enough. Instead, if something's going to be disruptive, or disrupted, it's going to have to be *method*, seen in a more social sense—as the social organization of signs, as ideology, as discourse; those are the more broadly social things that need to be shaken up: historicized, politicized, contextualized, totalized—by laying bare the social devices, or the social rules which are at work. (“Total Equals What: Poetics & Praxis,” 57; italics in original)

Andrews emphasizes that he sees his work not just as technique for technique's sake, but as a materialist critique of the present social forces which encode our day-to-day language practice. Such a poetry functions as an ideology critique. Such a questioning closely parallels Althusser's reexamination of the connections between language, ideology, and the self: “Like all

obviousnesses, including those that make a word ‘name a thing’ or ‘have a meaning’ (therefore including the obviousness of the ‘transparency’ of language), the ‘obviousness’ that you and I are subjects—and that that does not cause any problems—is an ideological effect” (*Lenin*, 171–72). In their questioning of the function of reference, the self-sufficiency of the subject, and the adherence to standard syntax of the closed text, some so-called Language poets have developed a poetry which functions not as ornamentation or as self-expression, but as a baring of the frames of bourgeois ideology itself.