

Praxis and Syntaxis

Ideology and the Economy of Space

"There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time."

—John Cage

In "Language, Realism, Poetry," the introduction to *In the American Tree*, Ron Silliman writes, "As is manifestly clear in the pages that follow, neither speech nor reference were ever, in any real sense, 'the enemy'" (p. xvi). In "Semblance" Charles Bernstein writes, "Not 'death' of the referent—rather a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has . . ." (*The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, 115; hereafter *LB*). In "Text and Context" Bruce Andrews notes, "Not exactly 'dereferentialist'—for can writing be adequately tagged with what it's not doing? Isn't that the old chest-busting negativism of the avant-garde?" (*LB*, 31). And Andrews and Bernstein together insist, in "Repossessing the Word," that "the idea that writing should (or could) be stripped of reference is as bothersome and confusing as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constructed world of 'things.' Rather, reference, like the body itself, is one of the horizons of language, whose value is to be found in the writing (the world) before which we find ourselves at any moment" (*LB*, ix).

The momentum behind such qualifications grows out of the desire of many so-called Language poets to break out of the anti-referentialist stereotype within which they have been defined. They themselves, of course, are largely responsible for such a characterization because of their earlier realism-equals-reification argument and their participation in symposia such as "The Politics of the Referent" (1977) and "The Death of the Referent?" (1981), the question mark in the latter title notwithstanding. Whether or not it is true that "reference . . . is one of the horizons of language" (Jacques Derrida's work at the very least challenges such a claim), it is important to examine the *reasons* some of these poets give for rejecting the stereotype of anti-referentialist. As the above statements indicate; the poets do not want to limit the scope of language nor to act out of pure negativity. They instead wish to *expand* the scope of language and to present a *positive* front in their challenge to common linguistic assumptions.

"The recent non-referential formalists, such as Clark Coolidge and Robert Grenier," writes Silliman, "frontally attack referentiality, but only through negation by specific context. To the extent that negation is determined by the thing negated, they too operate within the referential fetish" (*LB*, 131). The early work of Coolidge, Grenier, McCaffery, Andrews, and Silliman all served as the logical extension of the dominant focus of literary art in bourgeois society—the paradigmatic. Saussure, as we have seen, divided *parole* or the spoken utterance into two axes, the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic or, as Roman Jakobson later called them, the metaphoric and the metonymic ("Two Aspects of Language"). The paradigmatic axis refers to the word's "vertical" relation to a given *langue*, all other words which could be associated with or substituted for the word, as in metaphor when one word stands in for another. The paradigmatic axis also represents the possible connotations of the word and, ultimately, the word's signified. Questions of reference, then, examine the paradigmatic extensions of the sign. The syntagmatic axis, in contrast, refers to the word's "horizontal" relation to other words around it, as in a sentence, the chain of contiguous signifiers. It is the syntagmatic axis which limits the possible connotations on a given word's paradigmatic axis.

While the so-called anti-referential poem is posed as an attempt to deny the possibility of reference, it nevertheless remains within the paradigmatic approach to poetry. But once the question of reference has been bracketed, new possibilities for the conception of the poem arise. It is the achievement of many Language poets to think beyond the stalemate of the paradigmatic question and to pose poetry as an exploration of the syntagmatic, as a question of the power of frames and, by extension (as we shall see), of ideology. The role of poetry thus shifts from denying to revealing, unveiling, dis-covering.

In order to follow this important shift in focus from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic, I will first explore the assumptions inherent in a paradigmatic focus. Next I will look at the discussion of syntax initiated by the minimalist and conceptual artists and its influence on certain Language poets' expanded notion of poetic syntax. And then I will follow that exploration with a reading of particular Language works that are built on these notions of expanded syntax, and the political claims that arise from the process which could be called "syntaxis": the act of laying bare the role of syntactical frames in ideological production.

Extensions of the Paradigm

As Silliman explains in "Surprised By Sign (Notes on Nine)," Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, though written about French poets such as René Char, applies quite well to the Language poets represented in "The Dwelling Place" anthology of 1975 (the title itself coming from a phrase in Barthes's

book). Consequently, since my assertion that some modern poetry underscores the syntagm rather than the paradigm appears to contradict Barthes's discussion, I first need to address myself to the claims of *Writing Degree Zero*. In characterizing the shift in poetry that has occurred since Rimbaud, Barthes emphasizes the breakdown of syntax and the foregrounding of the word's materiality in modern poems. Whereas Barthes sees classical poetry as a decorative form of prose, both modes performing the same expressive function, modern poetry by contrast appears to be written in a language quite foreign to prose. The word in a classical poem was a function, a transparency; the word in the modern poem is a substance, an object *sui generis*. In modern poetry, Barthes explains:

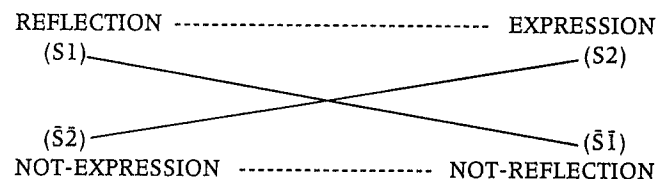
... connections only fascinate. ... the Word in poetry can never be untrue, because it is a whole; it shines with an infinite freedom and prepares to radiate towards innumerable uncertain and possible connections. Fixed connections being abolished, the word is left only with a vertical project, it is like a monolith, or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections: it is a sign which stands. The poetic word is here an act without an immediate past, without environment, and which holds forth only the dense shadow of reflexes from all sources which are associated with it. Thus under each Word in modern poetry there lies an existential geology. (p. 40)

By "project" Barthes may mean that the word extends only on its vertical axis (projection) or that the word's goal now is only to foreground its vertical, referential dimension. In either case he overlooks that the effect of the isolate word is not simply a focusing on the paradigmatic extensions due to its unanchored position in an indeterminate syntax but, more important, a reflection on the role of syntax itself in determining the particular coloring of a word. To say, furthermore, that such a word is now without environment (syntactical context) is to impose an unnecessarily narrow definition onto the word "environment." No word, even the word which appears by itself on an otherwise blank page, is without environment; it is simply without its normative environment. Barthes restricts himself to the paradigmatic extensions of the poem; but it is the syntagmatic extension which concerns many Language poets.

Certainly Barthes is not unusual in his focus on the referential vectors of the word, for that has long been the focus of questions about language. But the works of Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and other Language poets are not simply (or not always) a negative reaction to the domination of the paradigmatic; those works begin a thinking outside of purely paradigmatic concerns. In order to see this shift, we first need to explore (by means of what may at first seem an infinite digression through the history of literary theory) the possibilities of poetic form within such vertical concerns. For only then will the particular contribution of the Language poets be clear.

A good starting point is the Romantic challenge to late eighteenth-century mimetic modes. The dominant poetic modes available to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British poet were reflection and expression. Whereas empiricist philosophy led to the valorization of art as a reflection (a mirror) of the external world, the idealist philosophies of Kant, and later Hegel among others, led to the emphasis on the expression of the Imagination (a lamp) which to a greater or lesser extent colored one's perception of the external. In either case, however, the emphasis is on the mediation between perception and reality, subject and object, an epistemological or paradigmatic concern; while the nature of the medium is questioned, the essential grounds of the debate are not.

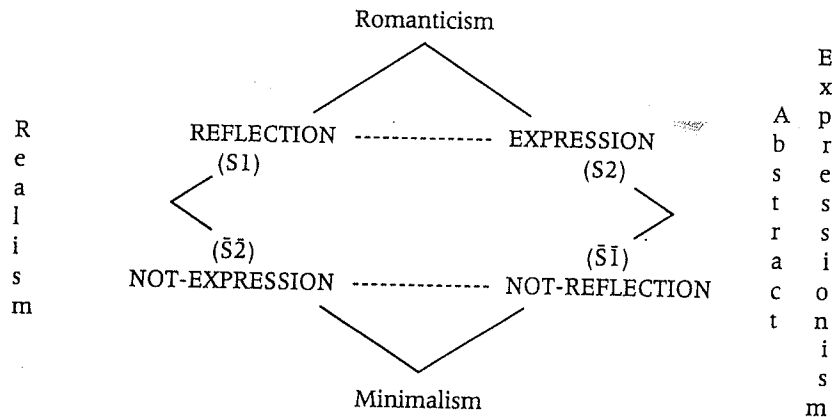
With the aid of semiologist A. J. Greimas's "semantic rectangle," however, we should be able to flesh out other possibilities extending from this initial binary opposition between representation and expression. Such a semiotic system could be schematized as follows:



In "The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints" Greimas and F. Rastier explain that any given seme (S_1) implies its contrary (S_2), even when that contrary is unstated. Any seme, in other words, is always one pole in a binary opposition. But that seme also implies its contradiction (\bar{S}_1) as well as the contradiction of its contrary (\bar{S}_2). When the question of the subject/object relationship dominates aesthetics, as it did in the late eighteenth century and beyond, then the possibilities for various aesthetic modes will grow out of that dominant question. Those possibilities result from the combination of two contiguous poles of the semantic rectangle, such as S_1 with S_2 , S_1 with \bar{S}_2 , S_2 with \bar{S}_1 , or \bar{S}_2 with \bar{S}_1 ; or as I have charted these possibilities above, Reflection with Expression, Reflection with Not-Expression, Expression with Not-Reflection, and Not-Expression with Not-Reflection, respectively.

Romanticism, though it tended to emphasize the expressive pole, must be seen as the combination of Reflection and Expression, as an attempt to mediate between both perceptual models. In "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" William Wordsworth himself emphasizes the necessity of both poles, his interest lying in "eye and ear, both what they half-create,/ And what perceive; well pleased to recognize/ In nature and the language of the sense./ The anchor of my purest thoughts. . . ." M. H. Abrams also stresses this reciprocity in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, claiming that for the Romantics "poetry is an interaction, the joint effect of inner and outer, mind and object,

passion and the perceptions of sense" (p. 51). Various Romantic metaphors for poetic creation (like the lamp) are "analogies of projection into, or reciprocity with, elements from without" (p. 62). Neo-classicism and, later, realism and naturalism could all be plotted, on the other hand, as the resolution of the axes of Reflection and Not-Expression. Abstract expressionism could be plotted between Expression and Not-Reflection, and minimalism between Not-Expression and Not-Reflection. In terms of a paradigmatic emphasis, then, minimalism would be one of the most negative manifestations possible. I would chart these combinations as follows:



As we shall see, the Language poets extend their aesthetic and political considerations beyond the limits of these four combinations. That extension results from these poets' turn to art theory.

The attention above to labels usually applied to schools of visual art, then, is not gratuitous. The work of the New York School poets has often been explained in terms derived from abstract expressionist painting. Jack Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* as well as Clark Coolidge's early work draw on abstract expressionist concerns, such as the primacy of ejaculatory expression without concern for the resulting form, as seen in Kerouac's spontaneous bop prosody and Coolidge's concern with jazz rhythms. (See the latter's *A Note on Bop*.) Just so, much early Language poetry was described in terms heavily influenced first by the critical discussions of minimal sculpture and then by the discussions of conceptual art. In order to understand the relevance of these art discourses to early works and critical claims by various Language poets, as well as to the question of paradigmatic concerns, we first need to examine the claims of minimalist and conceptual artists of the sixties and early seventies. It is in this art theory that one can best see the shift from a paradigmatic frame to a syntagmatic one.

A typical minimal art work might consist of a six-foot white cube placed

on the floor of an otherwise empty, all-white room. In this example both reflection and expression have been effaced. Whereas reflection leads the viewer to pass through a work to something other, as in looking "through" stone in order to see a body in an ancient Greek sculpture, the white cube represents nothing other than itself, its "cubeness," its material. It functions, in other words, as a material signifier. And whereas expression leads the viewer to read the work as the result of the artist's emotion or genius, positing an internal symbolic space, the white cube makes such a reading difficult. The white cube instead stands as an object, an arrangement of surface relations, a presence to be negotiated as the viewer walks around it, viewing it from all angles. "Minimal Art," painter Allen Leepa writes, "focuses on sensations based on direct perception of objects, which in painting are the lines, colors, planes, forms, and not on symbolic interpretation of them, as when a line is used to express a subjective emotional state of the artist" ("Minimal Art and Primary Meaning," 203). And therein lies the major distinction between minimalism and abstract expressionism.

The interaction between the gallery space, the object itself, and the viewer's body becomes the focus of the minimal sculpture, all seen in relation to one another within a perceptual field. In order to emphasize this focus, the work is pared down to its bare minimum of object-features, a kind of phenomenological reduction to a pure geometry of spatial perception. Our six-foot cube, as sculptor Robert Morris points out in "Notes on Sculpture" (1966), is different from every side. "The constant shape of the cube held in the mind but which the viewer never literally experiences, is an actuality against which the literal changing, perspective views are related. There are two distinct terms: the known constant and the experienced variable" (p. 234). The size of the object, furthermore, as with our six-foot cube, forces the viewer into an awareness of his or her own body as an object in space in a relationship with other bodies. If the cube were significantly smaller, the viewer may not become aware of these relationships; if it were larger, he or she may be overwhelmed, feel insignificant when the point is to feel in-relation-to.

As this stress on bodies in space suggests, minimal art, though negative in terms of reflection and expression, is far from negative in its ultimate claims. "It is not surprising," Morris writes, "that some of the new sculpture . . . has been called negative, boring, nihilistic" (p. 235). But such judgments imply a desire to find meaning *within* the object. The point of minimal sculpture is to expand the reading of the work outward from the object into the world. Here we see the beginning of a concern with an expanded notion of syntax which, although it remains within a primarily phenomenological or paradigmatic concern with subject and object, offers some Language poets a way into the question of the role of frames in constituting our experiences. Minimalism, then, can be seen as the site of transition from paradigmatic to syntagmatic concerns.

Because of its influence on minimalist thought, Merleau-Ponty's notion of "intercorporeal communication" is key to this transition. In expanding Husserl's concepts of intentionality (our ability to imagine the total cube when facing it from only one angle) and horizon (the limits of our perception of the cube, of our intentionality) from a concern with purely ideational objects to physical ones, Merleau-Ponty posits a language of the body or, more accurately, of bodies. We no longer look at a work and try to read the phenomenological horizon of the artist, as phenomenologist Georges Poulet would do. Instead we focus on the perceptual field in which the work sits as a material presence. In "The Philosopher and His Shadow" Merleau-Ponty explains "that the body is a 'perceiving thing,' a 'subject-object.' . . . space itself is known through my body. . . . When we say that the perceived thing is grasped 'in person' or 'in the flesh' . . . , this is to be taken literally: the flesh of what is perceived, this compact particle which stops exploration, and this optimum which terminates it all reflect my own incarnation and are its counterpart" (pp. 166-67). We are engaged in a language with the objects around us, he claims, our bodies in motion establishing a complex "syntax," so to speak, a redistribution of objects in space. Meaning is not sought within the objects themselves but in the fact of their pure presence and their relationships to other object-presences. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reduction, then, is not an attempt to extinguish meaning but instead to lay bare the basic units of perception responsible for meaning.

Poets of the Syntagme

Steve McCaffery, in "The Death of the Subject" (1976), extends Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics of presence to his own minimalist conception of language-centered poetry. And just like minimalist sculpture, McCaffery's minimalist poetics can be seen as an attempt to transform its initial negative rejection of reflection and expression into a more positive concern with the basic elements necessary for meaning. The result, however, is an ambiguous fusion of both negative and positive impulses. His negative response to the notion of reference is clear in the essay's subtitle, "The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing." If communication is unequivocally related to commodity fetishism—and we have seen in the last chapter that McCaffery sees such a relationship—then one obvious reaction is to write a poetry that refuses to communicate. McCaffery does this by reducing the sign to the cipher (his term for what I have been calling the material signifier). Like the minimal sculpture which no longer refers beyond itself, the cipher is an object to be negotiated rather than evaporated through the act of reading. In opposition to the notion of the cipher as simply a meaning fragment waiting for completion, McCaffery hopes that readers will approach the cipher as a graphemic presence, a phenomenological immediacy freed from the repressive constraints of a pre-

determined syntax. Readers themselves will then be free to arrange the various "presences" of the poem in any or all possible combinations. Through such language-centered (as opposed to referent-centered) writing, reading becomes writing.

But if, as McCaffery claims, meaning is a fetish and syntax an oppressive constraint, then this writing does not escape those problems. The role of oppressor is simply shifted from the writer to the reader in a curious form of what Freud calls the return of the repressed. Negation, as we have seen, depends on that which is negated. But the signs of a partial resolution to this problem appear in McCaffery's more positive claim for this poetic mode. His claim, like that of phenomenology, is that such linguistic reduction foregrounds the role of syntactical frames in the creation of meaning, thereby making the reader more conscious of the framing process itself. Hence "a new concept of the meaningful" [p. 12] in which "the spatial placement of the graphemes and the sheer fact of their density" are to be seen as an expanded notion of syntax. "Syntax is transformed to become a calculus of densities and a geomantic ordering of pure experiences" [p. 13].

What does such a "calculus of densities" look like? McCaffery cites a poem of his own:

wlkt	sTdh	
		(FPRTO
T		
	E	
	(fF)	
		Tts
xcphj t	t	
	cb	

("Death of the Subject," [11])

The analogy between the descriptions of minimal sculpture and poetry such as this becomes clear in McCaffery's description of the minimal poem. Just as in sculpture where the gallery room is seen as a field in which presences sit in a spatial relation to each other and to the shape of the room itself—negative space thus signifying as much as the objects within it—so the page of the minimal poem here is to be seen as a field in which graphematic presences sit in various relationships to one another. In such a poem "there is a striking non-gravitational effect . . . that rises from the multiple interlocking

of parts and the replacement of linear direction by a vertical and horizontal balancing which creates a tracery in spatial neutrality and highlights the coronal nature of the graphemes" [p. 14]. One could expand on McCaffery's reading as follows: The capital T in the above poem can be seen as a nexus of radiating vectors which connect it to the other letter combinations. Its capitalization as well as its spatial location relate it to the capital E below it. Its T-ness, on the other hand, relates it to the letter clusters above it, which all contain Ts, as well as to the group of lower case and upper case Ts in "Tts" and the individual lower case Ts farther below. Among its other graphemic qualities (such as the use of parentheses), then, the poem is organized—or perhaps I should say my reading organizes the poem—around the letter T.

Ironically, the conception of syntax needed to read McCaffery's poem depends on an analogy to "readings" of sculptural syntax. And those readings of sculpture depend on a prior analogy to language. The result of such a circular route is a language based on an analogy to *language* in general. We are not yet finished, then, with our excursion into the visual arts, for the particular form that such a metalanguage takes in the development of some Language poetry is partly determined by the metalanguage arrived at by various Conceptual artists from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. In addition to being a Conceptual artist, for instance, Vito Acconci coedited the poetry magazine *O-9* (1967–1969) with Bernadette Mayer, the latter having taught some of the Language poets at the St. Mark's poetry workshop in New York as well as having her own work in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine and in the anthology *In the American Tree*.

The Conceptualists' turn to language extended the process of abstraction which seemed already to have reached its limits in minimalism. Conceptualism grew out of the recognition that the reduction which the minimalists hoped for, the realization of a pure formal geometry, was subverted by the adherence to material objects. Geometry, after all, is a conceptual construct which may or may not be applied to matter. In order to understand what has been applied, furthermore, viewers of minimal sculpture need to learn a new language which extends aesthetic value to a new array of objects previously excluded from the realm of art. Whether an object is to be labeled "art," the Conceptualists claimed, depends on the values of a particular, defined aesthetic context—on a particular art language.

The Conceptualists were thus carrying on the self-conscious art practice begun by Duchamp with his ready-mades. Duchamp's exhibition of his "Fountain," as we have seen, was an attempt to lay bare the socially-determined context—the gallery—which conferred art status on objects exhibited therein. To the extent that minimalists remained dependent on gallery space in order to make their syntactic claims (not all minimal art appeared in galleries, of course), the Conceptualists saw them (the minimalists) as extending, but not significantly challenging, that particular context. The Conceptualists therefore often presented their work in other contexts such as

meadows, deserts, and books. Furthermore, since Minimalists remained tied to objects, they participated in the socially contrived illusion that art depends on material, material that could be appropriated and commodified by the art market. The Conceptualists therefore turned to less "material" matter, such as water, inert gas, or ultimately simply ideas, in a process of increasing "dematerialization" of art. The original conception, the idea, the intention of the artist is the art work.

"Declaration" thus becomes the determining context of art. Echoing Duchamp, the Conceptualists claimed that anything is art if you call it art. This claim leads to "works" such as Terry Atkinson's and Michael Baldwin's *Declaration Series* (1967), one part of which was their declaration that Oxfordshire was now to be thought of as an art milieu. Objects within Oxfordshire would automatically attain art status. But how does one view or experience Oxfordshire or a square mile of ocean water in an undetermined location or a particular amount of invisible gas as an art work? These works depended first on their declaration and then on their documentation through photographs and written descriptions (which sometimes ended up on museum walls in place of the "work"). Art was thus translated from a material mode to a propositional mode, claimed Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden in *The Grammarian* (1970): now "artwork may be largely contingent upon getting one's language straight. Consequently it may be formalizable: i.e., one of the functions of Conceptual Art may now be to sort out some basic semiotic guides or rules" (cited in Meyer's *Conceptual Art*, 100). It was this turn to semiotic questions, as well as to the various writing modes developed by the conceptualists (declaration, self-interrogation, performance instructions, documentation, and axiomatic proposition), which proved most important in the Language poets' application of conceptualism to poetry.

The step from conceptual art to "conceptual" poetry should seem quite natural since the turn from object to language places the visual artist in what is already the domain of poetry—the exploration of language. One significant difference between conceptual art and conceptual poetry, however, is that the artists' shift from their own medium (visible matter) to a foreign medium (language) perhaps cannot be achieved in poetry. What medium other than language can poetry take place in? Since poetry already takes place through language, Barrett Watten claims, it "takes into account a more significant 'resistance of the medium' than does Conceptual Art—which is often simply a projection of the category 'art' . . . onto phenomena outside the order of art. There can be no 'conceptual' poetry; I can think of no example of a poet transferring the designation 'poetry' onto materials without providing for an interior structure" (*Total Syntax*, 217). Of course someone *could* do so, claiming that Watten's notion of poetry, which rests solely on a set of conventions, does not allow for the possibility that anything can be thought of as having an interior structure once we "declare" that such is the case. There is nothing except social convention, one could argue, that prevents us from extending

the category "poetry" to anything we choose, whether or not Watten can think of such an example. Nevertheless, the value of this extension is not at all clear, since the value of the extension of "art" lies specifically in its recognition of conventions as particular languages through which particular objects or conceptions can be included or excluded from the category "art." From this perspective, poetry already exists within the privileged medium.

At any rate, the conceptual artists offered the Language poets a model of exploration which has proven quite valuable in coming to terms with the social implications of syntax; but it is the extent to which both question the social implications of poetic assumptions and conventions that distinguishes many Language poets from many conceptualists. The latter's recognition of the restrictive nature of art languages led many conceptualists to attempt to free art from such restrictions by breaking it out of those confines. The end result is that, as conceptualist Joseph Kosuth puts it, "art indeed exists for its own sake" (*Conceptual Art*, 170). In his discussion of the Art-Language group Watten explains: "There is no critique of motivation, neither for objects nor for frames. Rather, Art-Language builds only from the outside of already existing objects and frames. Its language can only contradict their ontology; it does not know how to change their meaning. The only meaning given by Art-Language is 'not this': the significant contradiction of the Romantic" (*Total Syntax*, 215). The role of any meaningful extension of "poetry," Watten implies, would then be to critique the motivation of objects and frames. In other words, it is not enough simply to identify frames; one must also ask where those frames come from and whose interests they serve.

Silliman's work often reveals his concern with the social motivation of frames. While the form of much of his work resembles the propositional mode of the conceptualists, as we shall see, he nevertheless insistently extends the focus of those propositions to a more consciously political level than many conceptualists would have. Silliman's *The Chinese Notebook* (in *The Age of Huts*, 41-66), for instance, provides a useful counter to Sol LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1968), which begins as follows:

- 1) Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.
- 2) Rational judgments repeat rational judgments.
- 3) Illogical judgments lead to new experience.
- 4) Formal art is essentially rational.
- 5) Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.

While the matter-of-fact, axiomatic mode of statement, the self-referring content, the numbering of passages, and the sentence-by-sentence progression of LeWitt's "Sentences" all influence the format of Silliman's *The Chinese Notebook*, their content is quite different. Whereas Silliman will echo a statement of LeWitt's such as "17) All ideas are art if they are concerned with art

and fall within the conventions of art," he will counter other claims such as "24) Perception is subjective."

Silliman's first proposition reveals his attention to and expansion of conceptualist claims:

1. Wayward, we weigh words. Nouns reward objects for meaning. The chair in the air is covered with hair. No part is in touch with the planet.

His attention to the materiality of words—in that only the words on the page can help one to distinguish between "wayward" and "weigh word"—immediately complicates the conceptualist claim to have finally got beyond the material by turning to language. The sentences that follow, furthermore, bring up the question of reference (which the conceptualists tended to ignore) while also mimicking the conceptualist work which can only exist in the mind. In proposition two, however, Silliman complicates the latter point as well:

2. Each time I pass the garage of a certain yellow house, I am greeted with barking. The first time this occurred, an instinctive fear seemed to run through me. I have never been attacked. Yet I firmly believe that if I opened the door to the garage I should confront a dog.

A perfect example of the conceptualist technique—we "conceive" of the dog which not only has never been seen behind the door but also never appears in this proposition until the final word. But unlike the conceptualist declaration, this proposition carries consequences should there in fact be a dog ready to attack from behind the door. Silliman seems to imply the practical need for being able to conceive of the dog even though in other situations (as in race discrimination) the dependence on categories may be socially harmful—not all conceptions carry the same implications.

Silliman's propositions in contrast to LeWitt's carry an explicitly political charge. According to proposition five: "Language is, first of all, a political question." Silliman is not merely looking for a way to purify poetic language; even the metalanguage of the declaration carries political implications:

7. This is not philosophy, it's poetry. And if I say so, then it becomes painting, music or sculpture, judged as such. If there are variables to consider, they are at least partly economic—the question of distribution, etc. Also differing critical traditions. . . .

No declaration, Silliman implies, exists outside of social frames such as economic structures and critical traditions; the declaration is marked by those conditions even when hoping to transcend them.

The awareness of context, in other words, takes place within a particular

context. Even so, that awareness of context is indispensable, a perpetual reflexivity to guard against the following:

32. The Manson family, the SLA. What if a group began to define the perceived world according to a complex, internally consistent, and precise (tho not accurate) language? Might not the syntax itself propel reality to such a point that to our own they could not return? Isn't that what happened to Hitler?

As a counter to Hitler's atrocities Silliman seeks a constant attention to the necessity for, yet arbitrariness of, ideological frames. Therein lies the role of the "poets of the syntagmeme" (proposition 44).

One way of laying bare the frame is to submit some constant (a word, phrase, sentence) to perpetual recontextualization. Through such a process the given constant takes on quite different connotations in different contexts. Bob Perelman's "Before Water" (7 Works, 53-66), reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's characteristic mode, recontextualizes a number of different constants through a process of reiteration in which nothing is repeated in exactly the same way. Perelman has suggested in correspondence that in the poem he is "trying to enact the birth of signification," which he does in both content and form. The recurrence of key words throughout establishes and complicates the theme of signification. In fact, this complication begins with the title itself: does "before" refer to place or time? "Before" as a preposition indicating a spatial relationship could refer to the speaker standing before water, fronting the external world which exists beyond or prior to signification, an object waiting for a name. If "before" indicates a temporal relationship, however, quite a different view of signification is implied: the word comes first, itself constituting (framing) water through the act of naming. In fact, both of these senses seem to occur simultaneously, establishing a tension and an ambiguity which determines the protean shifts of terms from line to line. The signified of these key signifiers—sentence, world, sound, water, noise, vocabulary, thought, sense, mind, edge, I, blue—shifts as the syntax of each new line shifts, each new incoming wave establishing a new relationship to the shoreline.

This series of 395 relatively discrete lines with no end punctuation establishes an intense rhythm, a temporal repetition that is at odds with the continuing shifts of the elements within the lines. The implication here is that although the perceiver is continually confronted with the same objects, each new instance of perception establishes a new relationship among these objects, underlining the protean and arbitrary nature of signification. Tracing one of these shifting constants, the word "blue," through the poem should illustrate this process:

Blue over once one more noise (line 9)
Water roll sense make blue (21)
The clear blue birth of green (23)

Blue course no noise in this sentence (27)
Blue and noise at each edge of the sound (34)
Blue water at the sense's edge (42)
It's up to blue to say (47)
Each vocabulary contains its own blue (49)

In these eight lines the connections of the object, the vocalized noise, and sense gradually merge into signification, but the arbitrariness of this process is clear—where do we divide blue from green in the ocean? Later in the poem:

I say blue I see blue (236)
Blue and again it's water (241)
Blue nowhere outside of noise (257)
The blue line means water, the noise means blue (260)
Death gives blue noise out there (262)
Blue (265)
Green and blue or see into it (318)
No blue, no green, no water, itself complete (355)
A separated noise clears the way to blue (356)
See blue where blue was (362)

After this process of establishing signifiers which constitute signifieds (line 236), which divide the world into manageable abstractions (line 265) which nevertheless continue to be arbitrary (line 355), language comes into its own, drawing up the signified concept even if the referent is absent (line 362). At this point in the poem the individual lines are no longer bounded by the line breaks but can be formed into larger units: "The water roll as before/ Once it happens to sound outside all time/ The water sounds okay/ The noise crosses the sentence/ I'm ready to see/ It's water again" (ll. 390-95). This process remains ambiguous, however—does line 391 go with 390 or 392 or 392-95? All are possible, which is precisely the point.

The extension of possibilities for meaning appears in the work of the sculptor who has had the greatest impact on the Language school's exploration of syntax—Robert Smithson. Smithson's appeal, from his early minimalist work through his conceptualist period, is his exploration of expanded scale, frames, and metaphor. A photograph of his *Gyrostasis* (1968), for instance, appears on the cover of Douglas Messerli's anthology, "Language" Poetries (1987). Smithson's description of that sculpture reveals some of the concerns important to various Language poets:

The title GYROSTASIS refers to a branch of physics that deals with rotating bodies, and their tendency to maintain their equilibrium. The work is a standing triangulated spiral.

When I made the sculpture I was thinking of mapping procedures that refer to the planet Earth. One could consider it as a crystallized fragment of a gyroscopic

rotation, or as an abstract three dimensional map that points to [Smithson's later work] the SPIRAL JETTY, 1970 in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. GYROSTASIS is relational, and should not be considered as an isolated object. (*The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 37).

The major point to recognize in Smithson's description is his interest in mapping phenomena which occur beyond direct perception, such as the rotation path of the earth or the objects of study of physics. In fact, the work of physicists, especially Niels Bohr's and Werner Heisenberg's recognition that only the development of a new language will provide scientists with the conceptual apparatuses needed to "map" newly discovered but imperceptible phenomena, has provided poet Nick Piombino with a mode of explaining the concerns of various Language poets. "Scientists and artists," Piombino writes, ". . . more and more realize that our whole grasp of experience is metaphorical. And now the new languages which scientists must speak in order to describe the future . . . have brought them closer to appreciating and finding use for imaginative expressions of linguistic transformation, not only in formal symbolic logic and mathematics, but also in the findings of poetry, art, and psychoanalysis" ("*Towards an Experiential Syntax*," 45).

Smithson's fascination with micro- and macroscopic fields leads him to an exploration of scale which lays bare the metaphoric nature of all scales and maps. His 1969 mirror displacements in the Yucatán (in which he places a series of square mirrors in various arrangements on the ground, often partially covering the mirrors with earth) are one example of his expansion of scale out of the museum, incorporating the earth itself into the work. This particular work, however, is largely ironic, a metaphor which plays on the notion that art holds a mirror up to nature. The varying positions of the mirrors are what produce the "reality" thereby reflected. Smithson insists that his work not be interpreted as an attempt to "get back to nature"; "nature" is merely one more value which serves to frame and delimit our experiences. "When the conscious artist perceives 'nature' everywhere," Smithson explains, "he starts detecting falsity in the apparent thickets, in the appearance of the real, and in the end he is skeptical about all notions of existence, objects, reality, etc." (*Writings*, 103). Such skepticism exposes the conventional frames.

Skepticism may also lead to a state of futility, however. "Minus Twelve" is a list of twelve categories, each with four subcategories, that evidently offer Smithson's views on the possibilities of art in contemporary society. "Minus Twelve" begins as follows:

1. USELESSNESS

- A. Zone of standard modules.
- B. Monoliths without color.
- C. An ever narrowing field of approximation.
- D. The circumscribed cube.

2. ENTROPY

- A. Equal units approaching divisibility.
- B. Something inconsistent with common experience or having contradictory qualities.
- C. Hollow blocks in a windowless room.
- D. Militant laziness.

(*Writings*, 81)

Smithson continues with the categories Absence, Inaccessibility, Emptiness, Inertia, Futility, Blindness, Stillness, Equivalence, Dislocation, and Forgetfulness. Smithson's "Minus Twelve" is ironic, however, for it is precisely qualities such as uselessness and entropy which give minimalist sculpture its value as a challenge to illusions about the normative concept of art. This irony has a positive dimension, as Barrett Watten explains in a discussion of Smithson's critical writings: "The realm of this literature is physical space; its constructive dimension is the illusion of time. The ironies of representation are located on the temporal axis, which is partial, entropic, and negative, while the affirmations of Smithson's method are space . . . where the ironies of the mind have been made physically real. Space implies a future which is not ironic" (*Total Syntax*, 81). Smithson's initial negative turn to entropy thus leads to a positive conception of space.

Language poet James Sherry, in his "Plus Thirteen" (*Popular Fiction*, 70-72), offers the positive translation that "Minus Twelve" implies. His first two sections, for instance, read as follows:

1. Usefulness

- a. Interlocking zones of varied configurations
- b. Colorful tools
- c. Precision of ambiguity
- d. Corral with the gate open
- e. Nourishment

2. Anti-entropic Forces

- a. Perception of subtle differences
- b. Events consistent with common experience
- c. Shape determining use
- d. Commitment
- e. Lazy arts

Sherry's implied criticism is that, while Smithson is correct in recognizing the positive side to entropy, the answer is not simply to give in to entropic forces but to put to use the attention to scale that the minimalists achieved. The "subtle perception of differences" can be a generative force, as Sherry's addition of a thirteenth section and a fifth subsection suggests. In contrast to Smithson's category 4C, "Toward an aesthetics of disappointment," Sherry

offers "Toward the politics of language." The exploration of the economy of syntactic space, in its analogy to ideological framing, becomes for Sherry a form of political praxis.

Watten in particular has shown an interest in Smithson's work. The former's notion of "total syntax," for instance, grows partly out of his appreciation of Smithson's expanded scale. By "total syntax" Watten means an attention to both the internal, formal, temporal construction of a work and its external, contextual, spatial dimension. An artist structures a work within a particular conjunction of various external frames, such as aesthetic value-systems, economic constraints, and ideological structures—all of which impinge on the work in different ways. "The interior and exterior syntax are not separate," Watten claims; "rapidly they merge in the array of possibilities" of combination and contradiction (*Total Syntax*, 68). Smithson's work, then, in its denial of a temporal, internal development, accentuates the external conditions which shape it and which are in turn shaped by it. The gallery room or the Yucatán bush are as much constructed by the work as vice versa. On the other hand, Clark Coolidge's poetry such as *The Maintains* (1974), in its refusal to admit traditional poetic notions of reference, extends the possibilities of its internal play.

This dialectic of inside and outside structures Watten's book-length poem *Progress* (1986). The poem's format immediately challenges our conventional expectations for poetic syntax, as the first stanza illustrates:

Relax,
stand at attention, and.
Purple snake stands out on
Porcelain tiles. The idea
Is the thing. Skewed by design. . . .

The contradictory commands that open the poem set the stage for its overall structure of thesis and antithesis, through which our expectations for a continuous frame of reference are constantly undermined. Yet we are to heed the content of these lines as well: we need to learn to relax our conventional expectations of poetic form and to pay strict attention to the contextual permutations throughout. The question of frame and context then comes up more explicitly in the third and fourth lines as we perceive the snake against its background, their interdependence heightened by the alliteration of "purple snake" and "porcelain." The "stands out," furthermore, posits a different frame for the word "stand" than appears in the second line. In a proposition reminiscent of the conceptualists we hear that the idea is the thing, while the emphasis on context is driven home with the attention to the "design" of elliptical construction (which is nevertheless provisionally enclosed by the period following the ellipses).

The second stanza contrasts this notion of design with a more standardized one:

One way contradictory use is to
Specify empty.
Basis, its
Cover operates under insist on,
Delineate. Stalin as a linguist. . . .

A translation of the first two lines might be something like "One way to use contradiction is not to specify any particular context." That practice is contrasted to the one that seeks a more "stable" basis, but that basis, arbitrary in nature, will have to be insisted on by a more or less hidden police state of grammar and usage ("Stalin as a linguist"). Through the dissociative structure of the poem, however, such bases are constantly put into question. The hope is that the expansion of interior scale (through such unrelenting reflexivity) might in turn influence the exterior frames as well: "And unearthed in the process/ A form compelling events" (p. 7).

One specific event revealing such a form, Watten has suggested in conversation, was the Iranian hostage crisis during the Carter administration. Through the media's constant barrage of negative information concerning Carter's handling of the crisis in Iran, the American populace was forced to shift from one frame to another—from Carter's view of foreign policy which claimed to emphasize human rights abroad to another which insisted that, because of this previous policy, Americans were now victims to other nations. This event exposed the possibility of shifting frames, of seeing one frame (Carter's) as invalid, but did not lead to an exploration of the *function* of frames. The Carter frame was undermined while at the same time the ground was laid for another frame (namely Reagan's) suddenly to make sense, to appear as the obvious and only way to view current events. Watten's book *Progress*, on the other hand, continually calls into question each new frame which seeks to fill the gap left by the previous one.

This is not to say that *Progress* does not argue for a particular meta-frame in which to view frames. But Watten insists that any particular articulation of meta-frames can only be provisional, only locally valid: "I don't think there's any essential validity or invalidity to a form—what's important are its intentions and its particular negotiation with its time and place" ("Barrett Watten on Poetry and Politics," 203).

Michael Palmer's concern with recontextualization takes place in what could be called a verse of qualification. In poem after poem he explores the syntactical and logical conventions built into our language which serve to define a specific context for a topic. Those conventions—such as parenthesis, apposition, and conjunction—are submitted to a disorienting "defamiliarization," as the Russian Formalists called it, a constant positing and subverting of

context. Palmer structures "The Village of Reason" (*First Figure*, 37–38), for example, around the contextualizing function of conjunction.

This is a glove
or a book from a book club

In this first stanza the poem begins with a shifter, as Jakobson and Benveniste call it, which fails to refer back to any specific antecedent. Is "this" the poem itself or some object to be identified within the poem? The conjunction "or" normally would clarify the situation a bit, but here it introduces even more complicating information.

Whatever partial resolution readers might impose upon the first stanza is likely to be challenged by the next:

This is the sun
or a layer of mud

The readers are given no clue as to whether the second "this" further qualifies the same object or refers to a new one, as in a list of objects. The ellipsis of the third stanza ("This is Monday,/ this an altered word") and the fourth stanza ("This is the village of reason/ and this an eye torn out") suggest that the poem presents a list of objects rather than a continuous qualification of one thing. But while the conjunction "and" serves to coordinate listed elements, it also serves to qualify the things listed by placing them in conjunction with one another: the "village of reason" is called into question by its association with "an eye torn out," suggesting that the connection between reason and perception is not absolute. In any case, the point is the fact of qualification, not the object qualified. A later stanza ("This is the mechanism/ and this the shadow of a bridge") emphasizes this point by reflexively drawing into consciousness the bridging mechanisms of the language.

Like Silliman's "parsimony principle," which states that readers will always take the path of least resistance by creating frames where no obvious frame exists, in "Lens" (*First Figure*, 9–10) Palmer suggests that readers will often bridge the gap between unrelated elements in a poem:

I failed to draw a map and you followed it perfectly
because the word 'cannot' inscribes itself here
to define an atmosphere of absolute trust
which both fastens and unfastens us.

The title suggests that the poem depends on the creation of perspective. Readers "trust" that such a perspective is provided to "fasten" the poet and audience within a specific "atmosphere." Whether such an experience is pleasant or unpleasant depends on the expectations of the perceiver:

The branches of the pine drooped heavily
in the moist air and this was pleasant
though at times it felt a little unpleasant
that he couldn't balance on his head
where the water trickled down the rocks.

Palmer next offers an example of the reader who bridges the gap between the available evidence and the possible meaning of the evidence:

He appears
to have seen the black pubic hair and the vagina
of a woman who squatted there to piss,
the gypsy nurse perhaps
who dealt in magic
holding the infant up with both hands.

Like Stephen Dedalus trying to mediate between the diaphane and the adiphane in the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses*, the speaker here tries to "read" the immediately visible conditions (perhaps the expression on someone's face). But the progression of that reading defies any immediately perceptible logic. Palmer continually undercuts the linearity of shifts from one perception to another.

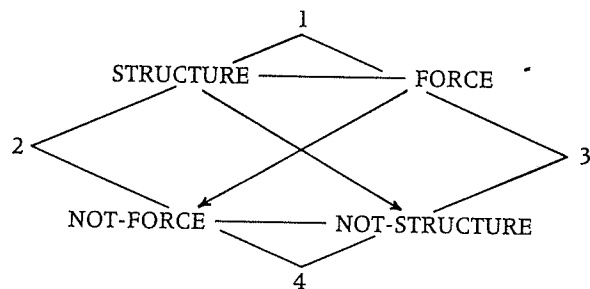
He told
how gazing at a mountain pool
had induced a kind of waking sleep
which led to other things.
("I am the lover in the sense of dust"
were his exact words, spoken softly.)

The conventional function of parenthesis is to clarify a specific context, and certainly the "which led to other things" above calls out for clarification. But the parenthetical information which follows only leads us farther from any logical perspective that might help us organize this information. In what sense is a lover like dust? And why should "he" (whoever he is) speak softly? We are never told the answers, only that "the way/ did not matter, up or down,/ a few steps should be enough." The point is not where we are going, Palmer suggests, but that step by step we will get there, even without a map.

Conclusion

At this point we should be able to sketch an outline of the various possible poetic manifestations this concern with syntax offers. If, as I have suggested, some of the Language poets have provided a way of thinking outside of the paradigmatic frame, then we should be able to plot a new semantic rectangle

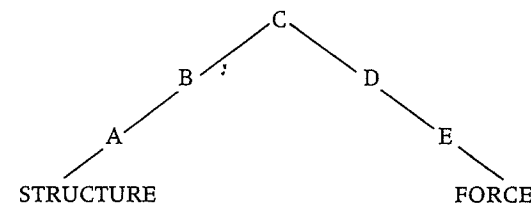
based on a new initial binary opposition. Instead of the Reflection/Expression opposition which applies to questions of representation (Reflection as the representation of the external, Expression as that of the internal), I propose that the initial concerns of many "Language poets are Structure (as in frame, context, horizon) and Force (as in anything which resists structure: desire, play, impulse). Thus we could arrange the structure of possible permutations of this initial opposition as follows:



Within the syntagmatic paradigm, so to speak, the above four positions represent the range of possible stances toward the notions of Structure and Force. (I should mention here that I offer this schematic map as a way of asking questions about the stands of various poets on these issues, not as an end in itself.) The first position, then, represents the attempt to take into account both a concern with structure and a concern with force. I would argue that this is the position most often expressed by Andrews and Bernstein, the position I provisionally refer to as "syntaxis." By "syntaxis" I mean the mode of writing which, by baring the frame, deliberately focuses on the process of signification as a production of meaning through the syntactical organization of force. When Andrews states that his writing grows out of a "desire to investigate the possibilities of meaning, rather than just the possibilities of form—to investigate, in a sense, the way our ability to create different kinds of content and different kinds of form gets shaped" ("Total Equals What," 50), he is talking about writing as syntaxis. Bernstein posits similar concerns in the following: "What pulses, pushes, is energy, spirit, anima, dream, fantasy: coming out always in form, as shape" (LB, 44). The shape of energy, the structure of force: the two are never separate.

The second position on the chart above represents the emphasis on writing that focuses on the work's structure at the expense of the disruptive forces resisting that structure. Certain comments by Watten might lead one to place him here. His desire for "total syntax," for instance, might be interpreted in this light, as well as his desire to see that, "although the landscape is mutating, the driver is always in control of the car" (*Total Syntax*, 64). While such a

reading of Watten's view might not be completely wrong, other of his statements complicate that reading. When Watten writes, for example, that for the contemporary writer "a thorough and uncompromising 'editorial' imagination is needed, alongside whatever dissociation participates in the original act" ("The XYZ of Reading," 4), he reveals a phase-one concern with the articulation of both structure and force. As he has told me in conversation, *Total Syntax* "implies an interest in extending the implications of art from the work into the world, but . . . also begs the questions of closure, totalization. . . . I'm not arguing for a totalization of art in political, psychological, or linguistic senses" ("Barrett Watten on Poetry and Politics," 196). It seems more accurate to place Watten along with Andrews and Bernstein in phase one while noting that phase one in fact offers a variety of possible articulations of structure and force. Phase one, as well as the other phases, should be depicted as a range of options between two extremes, as in the following extension of the preceding chart:



Thus we could say that Watten might appear at position 1A while Andrews might appear closer to 1D.

When Steve McCaffery calls for a poetry, on the other hand, built on the concern "for releasing energy flow, for securing the passage of libido in a multiplicity of flows out of the Logos" (LB, 88), he clearly articulates a position at the third phase. Here the emphasis is on the unrestrained flow of Force and the refusal to impose any obvious Structure whatsoever. But when he claims that "language centered writing not only codes its own flow but codes its own codicities," McCaffery reveals that—at least to some extent—he too works within the assumptions of phase one (perhaps at 1E). Nevertheless, his dominant position tends to be at phase three.

I cannot imagine what a poetry derived from phase four concerns would look like. Only the blank page would appear to meet the conditions of both Not-Force and Not-Structure, yet even the blank page can be read as the articulation of silence or refusal or death. "If the poet in Cocteau's Orpheus claims god-head by inscribing blank pages," Watten writes, "those pages still have been written—and if read aloud, they would have a temporal structure" (*Total Syntax*, 217). While the conceptualists have posited works which exist only in the mind, their position nevertheless is at phase one. Far from positing

nothingness, they are profoundly concerned with ideational structure and content. And as we have suggested above, even the presentation of nothingness signifies.

At any rate, one aim of the above chart is to differentiate between various poets I have discussed throughout these chapters. But I wish to stress that even such a differentiation remains at a necessarily general level and does not imply that everyone who might be plotted at a certain point—say 1D—will write a similar poetry. That both Andrews and Bernstein could be said to occupy such a position does not at all imply that their poetry is then indistinguishable, or even that the poetry of each is homogeneous. The same poet can occupy different points at different times. As Douglas Messerli has pointed out in his introduction to the *"Language" Poetries* anthology, "If Andrews positions himself as a writer who would make his poetry a public production, . . . Bernstein advocates a concept of privacy for writing" (p. 4). My point is to identify particular articulations of concerns, of the claims that each poet makes for his or her poetry; to that extent, then, Andrews and Bernstein can be seen to be much closer in their views than each would be to Watten or Silliman or Howe.

Conversely, as I suggested in chapter one, the recognition that certain Russian Futurist poets and certain Language poets might write a poetry that looks similar does not guarantee that the concerns behind those poetries are at all similar. The effects of the formal characteristics of a poem depend on the intricate texture of contexts in which the poem is inscribed; the same poem may serve widely divergent ends at different times, among different audiences, within different historical contexts. This is my claim in chapter three against Jameson's reading of "China." His equation, however qualified, of schizophrenic language and Language poetry reveals an uncharacteristic insensitivity on Jameson's part to the role of context in determining the effects of a work. Jameson's uneasiness with any but a normative, narrative syntax might place him at phase two above.

My second aim in the chart and in this chapter is to emphasize the significance of the shift from predominantly paradigmatic concerns to syntagmatic ones. As I have said already, the work of some Language poets extends beyond a purely negative reaction within the paradigmatic horizon. If the claims of this poetry rested solely on those that I examine in chapter four—that this poetry subverts the referential fetish—then such a challenge, though important, would fail to point beyond the vertical axis.

It has been my hope in this chapter, however, to emphasize the positive challenge of this poetry—the challenge to question not just what we think but also the way we structure what we think. As I have suggested in chapter two, this challenge is an injunction not merely to think clearly but to recognize the role of ideological frames in the constitution of our world. Andrews makes this concern quite clear in the following: This poetry "moves toward a more critical (or contextual) focus on meaning itself and on . . . [an] overall social

comprehension. And I think this involves a greater sensitivity to the matter of ideology—which is embodied in discursive frames that we use and in the social arrangements which stage the possibilities for meaning to be produced" ("Total Equals What," 50). That sensitivity to ideology lies in the manipulation of syntactical frames, in the creation of what Bernstein has called a "syntaxophony," in order first of all to lay bare the framing process of ideology; and second, to place the reader in a more active role as the coproducer of the meaning of the poem. Such a foregrounding of the "materialism of the idea," as Jacques Derrida has called it, through a conscious syntactical praxis is necessary in order to "counterbalance the neutralizing moments of any deconstruction" (*Dissemination*, 207). The important but neutralizing deconstruction of the "referential fetish"—and with it the bourgeois claim to "natural" language—must be accompanied by the laying bare of the framing process. Otherwise we simply substitute one realism for another and thereby perpetuate the very arbitrariness we criticize. The answer to reification is not a further obliteration of meaning—as McCaffery and Melnick have at times suggested—but a laying bare of the social process of meaning production. As Andrews puts it (*LB*, 136): "To politicize—not a closure but an *opening*." Or as Marx puts it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "The social revolution . . . cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future."