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Textual Politics 
 and the Language Poets

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to Jennifer, Katy, and Dylan

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Preface

"Let us undermine the bourgeoisie." So Ron Silliman ends his contribution to "The Politics of Poetry" symposium in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 9/10 (October 1979). The organizing topic of that symposium was "what qualities writing has or could have that contribute to an understanding or critique of society, seen as a capitalist system." While many respondents pointed out their difficulty with the notion that writing *per se* has any generalizable qualities, most of the participants agreed that, in one way or another, a particular poetry at a particular time may offer a critique of bourgeois society. Specifically, what has come to be known as Language Poetry is held out to be one of the poetic modes of the present moment (in addition to certain minority, feminist, and gay poetics) which functions as such a critique.

But in what ways can the following excerpt from Charles Bernstein's "Lift Plow Plates" be seen as a critique of capitalist society?

For brief scratches, omits,
lays away the oars (hours).
Flagrant immersion besets all
the best boats. Hands, hearts
don't slip, solidly
(sadly) departs.

(*Islets/Irritations* 9)

In what ways is this writing " 'decentered', 'community controlled', taken out of the *service* of the capitalist project," as Bernstein himself puts it in his contribution to "The Politics of Poetry?" This book is a critical analysis of how some so-called Language Poets have answered those questions.

Who are the Language poets? The answer to that question depends on how one defines the label. One could begin, for instance, by listing those poets (most born between 1940 and 1950) who for fifteen years or so have appeared in the following Language anthologies: *Toothpick*, *Lisbon & the Orcas Islands* (1973); *Alcheringa* (1975); *Open Letter* (1977); *Hills* (1980); *Ironwood* (1982); *Paris Review* (1982); *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984); *Change* (1985); *Writing/Talks* (1985); *boundary 2* (1986); *In the American Tree* (1986); and "Language" *Poetries* (1987). While the periphery of the group remains rather amorphous—Silliman lists almost eighty poets who might have accompanied the forty who are represented in *In the American Tree*—many names frequently recur in anthologies, critical essays, and poetry magazines such as *This*, *Tattel's*, *Roof*, *Hills*, *Miam*, *Qu*, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, *The Difficulties*, *A Hundred Posters*; and more recently (though not as the predominant group) *Sulfur*, *Temblor*, *Sink*, and *Tramen*. Those frequent names are Bruce Andrews, Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Charles Bernstein, David Bromige, Clark Coolidge, Alan Davies, Ray DiPalma, Robert Grenier, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Steve McCaffery, Michael Palmer,

Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Peter Seaton, James Sherry, Ron Silliman, Diane Ward, Barrett Watten, and Hannah Weiner.

Why the name Language? The answer to that question would take us beyond the above listing of names—for what poet in one way or another does *not* deal with language? What particular use of or attitude towards language connects these poets and excludes others? Before proceeding with that analysis, I need to point out what I am *not* doing in the pages that follow. I do not attempt to define that which most of the poets I discuss have denounced—the label Language Poetry itself. As Silliman has argued, at least since his editing of “The Dwelling Place: 9 Poets,” what connects these writers (first called “language-centered” in Steve McCaffery’s 1976 essay, “The Death of the Subject”) is not any particular style or practice but a “community of concern for language as the center of whatever activity poems might be” (*Alcheringa*, 118). The way Susan Howe, for instance, enacts this concern with the foregrounding of language does not at all resemble the way Silliman often does. While some of Howe’s poems might superficially resemble some of Bruce Andrews’s, the tone of each could hardly be more dissimilar (as we shall see).

Nevertheless, one can generalize more safely about the poetic concerns which have led these poets, from the first issue of *This* in 1971 to the present, to establish an elaborate network of small presses and talk series, a network which has possibly allowed for a greater degree of cross-fertilization and of independence from the defining process of academic criticism than perhaps any group since the Black Mountain school. Those concerns, for the most part, grow out of the rejection of the dominant model for poetic production and reception today—the so-called voice poem. According to many Language poets, the voice poem depends on a model of communication that needs to be challenged: the notion that the poet (a self-present subject) transmits a particular message (“experience,” “emotion”) to a reader (another self-present subject) through a language which is neutral, transparent, “natural.” Carla Harryman’s “For She” can be read as an exploration of narrative assumptions:

The back of the head resting on the pillow was not wasted. We couldn’t hear each other speak. The puddle in the bathroom, the sassy one. There were many years between us. I stared the stranger into facing up to Maxine, who had come out of the forest bad from wet nights. I came from an odd bed, a vermilion riot attracted to loud dogs. Nonetheless, I could pay my rent and provide for him. On this occasion she apoloized.

(*Under the Bridge*)

Harryman’s poem goes through the motions of narrative, but one would be hard put to summarize what story has been told. “For She” challenges the “naturalness” of the narrative mode by foregrounding the devices which organize otherwise disparate elements into a seemingly seamless whole. This challenge to the “natural” look of the voice poem is one major concern of most Language poets.

Bernstein writes that “there is no natural writing style” (*The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, 43; hereafter cited as *LB*). What looks natural about a given poem is actually the result of a number of procedures and assumptions about writing that the author may be more or less conscious of when composing. Those procedures and assumptions are in fact social constructions which have become conventions. Thus most Language poets attempt to remind us of the socially contrived basis of any writing. They do not do so, however, by abandoning modes of writing, for such an action is impossible. “Modes cannot be escaped,” Bernstein continues, “but they can be taken for granted. They can also be meant” (p. 44). It is the mode-that-is-meant, so to speak, the exploration of the possibilities for meaning-production, which lies behind most Language poetry.

The last point cannot be stressed enough. For, although these poets rigorously deconstruct the notions behind much contemporary poetry in this country, that deconstruction is often followed by an attempt to develop a constructive writing practice. As poet Steve Benson has put it, these writers “markedly propose conscious value to what could otherwise be taken as impingements in a literature of autonomous display” (*In the American Tree*, 487). Such writing is seen to be constructive in its demolition of the conventional relationship between the active (dictatorial) writer and the passive (victimized) reader. Language writing is often posed as an attempt to draw the reader into the production process by leaving the connections between various elements open, thus allowing the reader to produce the connections between those elements. In this way, presumably, the reader recognizes his or her part in the social process of production. But just as important, the ambiguity of the structure of many of these poems should remind the reader that any connections drawn are arbitrary. It is the framing process itself, and by extension the process of ideological framing, which is no longer taken for granted. I refer to this laying bare of the framing process as “syntaxis.” Through this dissection, the exploration of the possibilities of syntactical construction serves as an ideology critique by drawing our attention to the socially-determined frames by which we constitute our world.

In the pages that follow I explore the claims and writings that have led to and support such a process of syntaxis. In order to emphasize that the formal dimension of these poems does not in itself produce a radical critique of bourgeois ideology, I trace in chapter one the recent history of formal concerns in the works of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, the Russian Futurist poets, the Dadaists, André Breton, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, and John Ashbery. I stress that whatever political value might be attached to a given poetic mode must take into account the historical context in which each manifestation of that mode appears. While Susan Howe, for example, may model her own work on certain aspects of Dickinson’s, one must always keep in mind the century that separates the two. No mode, in other words, does its work all by itself in some transhistorical way (as Julia Kristeva’s notion of revolution in poetic language might lead one to conclude).

In chapter two I begin an analysis of the political claims that various Language poets have made for their writing. What do Ron Silliman and Steve McCaffery mean, for instance, when they claim that their work is a challenge to reification in capitalist society? How can such poetry be seen as a challenge to the notion of the self-present subject which is seen to underlie capitalist ideology? And how do these poets see their work as the creation of a democratic writer-reader relationship rather than as an obliteration of any possibility whatsoever to read such work? I also propose a reading of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology that provides theoretical and political support for such a poetic practice.

In chapter three I focus on a Marxist challenge to the claims of some Language poets, in particular, Fredric Jameson's implied charge that such poetry, in that it resembles schizophrenic language as Lacan has described it, contributes to—rather than challenges—the reification of late capitalist society. Because of Jameson's influence on the theoretical development of many Language poets, such a confrontation promises a fruitful exploration of the political claims of the poets in this study.

I extend that confrontation in chapter four by focusing in detail on the argument of some Language poets that literary realism is a form of reification. Since the Jameson-“Language” school debate so closely resembles the earlier Lukács-Frankfurt School debate, and since many Language writers draw on the aesthetic theory of members of the Frankfurt School, I summarize the major points of that earlier debate. As the Marxist interpretation of the word “reification” comes from Lukács, such a review is especially important for clarifying the issues of the present writers.

The realism-equals-reification argument, which I explore in chapter four, is predominantly a negative argument in that it remains within the categories of the view it seeks to displace. To the extent that Language writers see their work as a denial of reference, they remain within a referential frame. But in chapter five I point out that the shift from a referential to a syntactical frame—or, as I explain, from a paradigmatic to a syntagmatic frame—provides a truly constructive context in which to view the political claims of some Language poets. Because such an argument depends to a certain degree on notions of syntax developed by the minimalist and conceptualist artists of the 1960s and early 1970s, I review the arguments of those artists and show how those concerns tie in with Language poetry. Chapter five also serves as a conclusion, for it is in the turn to what I have called syntaxis that many of the concerns which I explore in the earlier chapters come together as a rigorous critique of ideology.

I wish to stress at this point that there is no single argument, political or otherwise, that applies to everyone labeled a “Language poet.” I make no claim, therefore, that the particular political positions to be analyzed in the following pages apply to all or even most of the Language poets. As should become clear, even the handful of poets whom I discuss here vary widely in

their view of the connections between poetry and politics. To the extent that a particular point may seem applicable to all whom I discuss here, then some of these claims are more generalizable than others, and it has been my goal to make clear which claims can and cannot be extended beyond a particular poet. Because of this difficulty, I have tended to focus on those Language poets who have made specifically Marxist claims for their work. Those poets are the San Francisco Bay area poets Ron Silliman (author of *Ketjak* [1978], *Tjanting* [1981], *ABC* [1983], *The Age of Huts* [1986]; and editor of *In the American Tree* [1986]), Bob Perelman (*7 Works* [1978], *Primer* [1981], *The First World* [1986]; editor of *Hills* magazine and *Writing/Talks* [1985]), and Barrett Watten (*Opera-Works* [1975], *1-10* [1980], *Total Syntax* [1985], *Progress* [1986]; co-editor [with Robert Grenier] of *This* magazine, co-editor [with Lyn Hejinian] of *Poetics Journal*), the New York poets Charles Bernstein (*Poetic Justice* [1979], *Controlling Interests* [1980], *Islets/Irritations* [1983], *Content's Dream* [1986], *The Sophist* [1987]; co-editor [with Bruce Andrews] of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* [1984]) and Bruce Andrews (*Praxis* [1978], *Sonnets—memento mori* [1980], *Wobbling* [1980], *Love Songs* [1982], *Give Em Enough Rope* [1985]; co-editor [with Charles Bernstein] of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* [1984]), and Toronto poet Steve McCaffery (whose work has been primarily performance and sound poetry; editor of *The Politics of the Referent* [Open Letter 1977]).

When I choose other poets as examples, I mean for them to be viewed as examples of the particular point I am making at the time, not as poets who would share fully the arguments of the six poets above. Some poets, such as Clark Coolidge and Robert Grenier, disavow any Marxist claims whatsoever. Steven Benson, while not denying certain political intentions, chooses a much more cautious relationship to Marxism, especially to what he sees as its tendency towards an either/or logic. Thus any claims that Language poetry in general is a Marxist challenge to bourgeois poetics is an illegitimate over-generalization. The six poets I study in depth in the final chapters, however, all in one way or another see the syntactical play in their poetry as a socialist critique of the ideology of capitalism.

Textual Politics and the Language Poets