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Freneau's "manner" depended upon his competence (p. 17) in being colloquial, self-assured that his words held the same meaning for his audience as they did for himself, and in being less self-consciously "poetic" because he had a sense of "direct address"—by which Hiltner suggests that Freneau, at his best, created a unique "voice" for each poem's discourse, rather than used a stereotypical persona who verbalizes what he sees (pp. 17–18). Hiltner does not give Leary full credit for his last suggestive generalization, which is remarkably similar to Harold Bloom's about the American poetic tradition as a whole; even so, Leary's touchstone points to a sense of tradition, but Hiltner's notice ends in isolation, without clear relevance to her study of newspaper variants, the need to establish a canon, and what the canon might show.

This narrowness of commentary reveals Hiltner's central difficulty. Hiltner presumes that the crooked path of newspaper variations can be straightened out to give a self-evident version of "final intentions" that correct Leary's. She fails to see that beneath the need to determine authorship, the fundamental reason for establishing a canon of an author's works is to prepare for such matters as how to read any variant or how to understand a theme or aspect of art. In sum, a canon only reflects an implicit hypothesis that permits such readings and understandings, and it is just this focus of an underlying hypothesis that this volume inherently lacks and sorely needs.

George Hartley, reviewer. *The L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E Book*, Edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), xi + 295pp. \$13.95; *Writing/Talks*, edited by Bob Perelman (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), viii + 295pp. \$14.95; and Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), xiii + 241pp. \$13.50.

Consider the following lines from Charles Bernstein's "Standing Target":

glass must
are for
in : they
 , her

What are we to make of this? The *look* of the lines resembles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, but even at his most elliptical, Olson tends to present some semantic continuity. Few readers of poetry, it would seem, have been trained to deal with the work of Bernstein and the other so-called Language poets. This fact unfortunately has led not to critics' attempts to enlarge readers' abilities but instead to attacks on this recent drift of American poetry. Earlier avant-garde writers as

well have tended to encourage this reaction in the academy by fostering an anti-social, elitist hermeticism. "The failure of the postmodernists to develop a comprehensive poetics," writes Barrett Watten, "is now matched, in the university, by the over-development of critical theory without any sense of American writing since 1945." Lucky for us, some of these recent poets have begun publishing in Southern Illinois University Press's "Poetics of the New" series, a move intended evidently to bridge this chasm. The result of this attempt to reunite poetry and theory is three of the most important texts in two decades on modern American poetics: *The L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E Book*, *Writing/Talks*, and *Total Syntax*.

The least maverick of the three, and therefore probably the best starting point for the newcomer, is Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax*. The major strengths of this collection of transcribed talks are (1) its placing of this poetics in the literary and critical avant-garde tradition, and (2) its development of reading tools for coming to terms with the poetry. Watten identifies the major critical/poetic tradition behind "Language poetry" to be Russian Formalism, especially the works of Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Roman Jakobson. In the American tradition are Stein, Zukofsky, and Hart Crane through Olson, Creeley, Cage, and most recently Clark Coolidge. Watten's identification of these influences provides him with the major reading strategy needed for recent poetry: Formalist analysis. The Russian Formalist categories of baring-the-device, making-strange, motivation-by-the-text, and *zaum* (transrational writing) thus become key in approaching the work of Coolidge, Michael Palmer, Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, and their associates. He discusses Silliman's work, for example, as follows:

In Silliman's book-length works, *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*, the sentence rather than the word [as in Silliman's *Mohawk*] is the unit of investigation into scale. Materials from the world at large are taken in and integrated into the ongoing construction; they are given an initial scale in the form of the sentence, but otherwise their origins are diverse. . . . Each isolated sentence has a simultaneous value as both description and example of structure—and the argument of the work is the interanimation of this relation as it develops. Logical, narrative, or simply accretive orders build up and break down in complex displays. (p. 107)

Another feature that distinguishes Watten's book from much contemporary criticism is his concern with the politics of poetry. Like many of the other Language poets, Watten works on developing a Marxist/poststructuralist concern with the political ramifications of poetic assumptions and language use. He by no means, however, lets his friends slide by with merely sounding politically correct. For instance, he fears that Steve McCaffery comes dangerously close to setting up "an essential absolute (reference = alienation)." "The identification of reference," Watten argues, "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" (p. 54). Watten prefers Silliman's approach to the writer's alienation from her words: "The passion for explanation in Silliman is an act of compensation for the autonomous word; in the act of writing the word is returned to the world, though this time the writer too is in it" (p. 59).

Like Watten's book, Bob Perelman's *Writing/Talks* is also a collection of transcripts. The Language group's valorization of the collective shows through more clearly in this multi-authored work. In addition, each talk records not only the speaker's presentation but often the audience's reactions as well. Whereas the quality of argument in *Total Syntax* remains consistent throughout because of Watten's rigorous and intelligent discussions, the quality of talks in *Writing/Talks* varies considerably (as we might expect from any collective venture). But the audience response following these talks tends to save some of the problematic presentations. When Charles Bernstein, for instance, in an otherwise perceptive discussion, "Characterization," misconstrues the structuralist notion of the arbitrary nature of signification, the audience quickly interrupts and detours him into a valuable digression on differential meaning.

The most important feature of Perelman's collection is that almost every speaker teaches how to read her/his work and the work of other poets in their mode. To the common charge, for instance, that the new poetics champions opacity for opacity's sake, a sort of rebellion without a cause, Michael Palmer answers:

By foregrounding the inherent complexities and complex possibilities of discourse, poetic speech often becomes paradoxically more direct in its presentation than apparently simpler forms of writing; the evasions, displacements, recurrences, etc., stand as an immediate part of the message. . . . Put another way, what is taken as a sign of openness—conventional narrative order—may stand for concealment, and what are generally understood as signs of withholding or evasion—ellipsis, periphrasis, etc.—may from another point of view stand for disclosure. (p. 227)

Lyn Hejinian furthers this point:

One of the results of this [montage] compositional technique, building a work out of discrete units, is the creation of sizable gaps between the units. The reader (and I can also say the writer) has to overleap the period, and cover the distance to the next sentence. But, meanwhile, what remains in the gaps, so to speak, remains crucial and informative. Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (focus backward) and the discovery of newly structured ideas. (p. 274)

Here we see a continuity, at least in part, from Pound to the Language poets in their demands on the reader. But Silliman, in perhaps the most important talk in the collection, cautions us against such easy identification. Pound's collage technique tends to unify fragments in a poem, to minimize "the perceptibility of these breaks" (p. 174). In Jack Spicer's poetry, however, "coherence and cohesion lie at the surface, masking-while-revealing a deeper chaos below" (p. 175). It is Spicer, not Pound, whom Silliman sees as a model for the Language poets:

For lack of a better term, I am going to call the strategy [common in Spicer's work] "overdetermination." But rather than give it a strict Lacanian or Althusserian definition, I want to use it to simply indicate an effect Spicer achieves through a number of different devices: the failure (or refusal) of an idea or image to add up (or reduce down) to a

single entity. . . . No logos, this implies, can be said to exist which does not, within itself contain contradiction, negation or some effacing otherness. (p. 169)

Add to such important general statements as the above the close readings by these poets of their own work, and *Writing/Talks* becomes another necessary guide to Language poetry.

To get a real sense of the writing characteristic of these poets, readers should turn to *The L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E Book*, a selection of statements on poetics from editors Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein's *L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E* magazine, which ran from 1978 through 1981. Although generalizing about style when discussing a number of different writers often obscures important differences between them (an issue that most of these poets take up when rejecting catch-all names like "Language Poets"), nevertheless we may point to certain selections as illustrative of the group's dominant tendencies. Peter Seaton's essay/poem, "Texte," shows the common fascination with variable syntax and the estrangement of words placed in unusual contexts:

In a tree, on a tree limb, two strong arms of certain care. Like ecstasy prolongs some dream ensemble or public effect that could requires this distant world it's increasing kinds of lover reviving a writer understanding systems in the form of ways in which the days adapt noises, super dates, intact, some exception someone subjects something to subjects me to an outline of consent like you want to know who don't deal waiting for an example of others composing lines within a series, number one nine three three three. (p. 66)

Here we see in form, as well as in what content we can reconstruct, what might be called a poststructuralist poetic, or what Steve McCaffery in his discussion of Michael Palmer refers to as "a splendid poetry of displacement, of shifts and nomadic drifts of text through zones of page" (p. 257). As opaque as this writing may seem, the point is not to deny the possibility (the inescapability) of reference, as Andrews and Bernstein insist, pointing out that it "is the multiple powers and scope of reference (denotative, connotative, associational), not writers' refusal or fear of it, that threads these essays together."

What also threads these essays together is a concern with the politics of reference and of language in general. Indeed, Andrews and Bernstein entitled the second of three sections (almost a third of the book's length) "Writing and Politics." As in Watten's *Total Syntax* and Perelman's *Writing/Talks*, the questions of form grow not just out of aesthetic concerns but also (and for some poets, predominantly) out of Marxist concerns with the hegemony of bourgeois discourse and its effects on writing. Forty pages of section two are devoted to a symposium on "The Politics of Poetry," with essays such as "The Dollar Value of Poetry," "Writing Power and Activity," "Agent of Language," "Is It Xerox or Memorex?," and "Writing and Capitalism." "What happens when language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development," writes Silliman, "is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for invention of 'realism,' the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought" (p. 125).

Here, I believe, is the key to "reading" the disjunctive syntax and grammar

that characterizes so much of the Language poetry. If the effects of commodity fetishism on language show up in the transparency of the signifier, the fluidity of the medium, then one form of political critique is the jarring of us "anaesthetized" readers out of our passive relationship to discourse. By drawing attention to the individual word, for example, as Bernstein does in the opening passage of this review, the writer reestablishes, if only momentarily, the materiality of the signifier and thereby thwarts the transparency-effect of commodified language. As Steve McCaffery puts it, "One thing a language centered writing desires is a presentness that language primarily focussed on reference can't provide" (p. 162).

Thus the primary value, as I see it, of Language poetry is its rigorous attempt to synthesize current political, theoretical, and aesthetic concerns into a poetic-as-critique looking forward to the establishment of a classless society. Only history will show, of course, how successful this synthesis turns out to be. But with the publication of *Total Syntax*, *Writing/Talks*, and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, that synthesis looks all the more promising.

Sam B. Girgus, reviewer. *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* by Shoshana Felman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). 169pp. \$20; and *Reading Lacan* by Jane Gallop (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). 198pp., \$8.95 paper.

Shoshana Felman begins her new book on Jacques Lacan with an instructive anecdote. While working on her doctorate at a European university, she had been intrigued by the controversy over *Ecrits*, the only book by Lacan available at that time. When she went to purchase it at the university bookstore, the owner warned against it. "Aren't you in the business of selling books?" she asked. "Yes," he answered, "but I am also here to give advice to students: this is an expensive book, and I promise you: it is unreadable, totally incomprehensible. Don't buy it." Felman never really disputes this judgement. More often, she seems to agree with it. At one point she admits, "I can offer only my own reading of Lacan's unformulated theory of reading, through an analysis of Lacan's practice as a reader and of what constitutes what I take to be the pathbreaking originality of this practice." Nevertheless, in spite of such difficulty, she proceeds to describe how Lacan's work "made a difference in my own relation both to life and to my work." For years now, Lacan has changed such lives and careers. Writing in a style designed to replicate his philosophy of the permanent presence of the unconscious and the uncertainty of knowledge, he is to orthodox psychoanalysis what the Marx Brothers are to the art of cinema. Yet, as we all know, the impact of his advancement of Freudian theory into linguistics has been enormous. His work has initiated a new direction in psychoanalytical criticism and two of the most important and impressive critics of this movement are Felman and Jane Gallop. For both writers, Lacan functions as a kind of natural force that provides a personal source of energy for their own brilliance. Their

new books follow their previous works in establishing a coherent critical theory based on Lacan's insights into the relationship of the unconscious to language and sexuality. Both focus on Lacan's work as a foundation for a new understanding of reading.

Felman succinctly formulates the fundamentals of Lacan's development of Freud. "Freud's discovery, for Lacan, thus consists not—as it is conventionally understood—of the revelation of a new *meaning* (the unconscious) but of the practical discovery of a new *way of reading*." This emphasis marks an important distinction between the old and the new psychoanalytical criticism, a distinction upon which she elaborated in her earlier book, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Felman's way suggests the coordination between psychoanalysis and literature as opposed to more conventional applications of psychoanalysis to literature that turn creative works into so many textual patients to be analyzed mechanically and murdered by clinical labels. Instead, she argues that the unknown in the unconscious should make all psychoanalytical criticism an exercise in performance, process, and practice. "The unconscious is a reader. What this implies most radically is that whoever reads, interprets out of his unconscious, is an analysand, even when the interpreting is done from the position of the analyst." So much for pompous, superior, and detached psychoanalytical readings that assume a privileged position for the critic. At the same time, the power of the unconscious increases rather than diminishes the importance of interpretation. "Unconscious desire proceeds by interpretation; interpretation proceeds by unconscious desire." In her essay on Poe, she shows how this theory of reading suggests the importance of seeing in the signifier "not just meaning but the lack of meaning; that significance lies not just in consciousness but, specifically, in its disruption" so that the boundaries between interpreter and text, analyst and analysand, collapse. This understanding of reading confirms for Felman Freud's perception of himself as a new Copernicus. Because of Freud we move from the "mode of reflexivity" that constitutes the basic symmetry and duality of what Lacan calls "the mirror stage" to a new reflexivity in which "Freud displaces the center of the human world from consciousness to the unconscious." We get a new universe in which, as interpreted by Lacan, "there are no longer distinct centers but only contradictory gravitational pulls."

Following a provocative discussion relating psychoanalysis to teaching, Felman makes one of her most startling and innovative contributions to psychoanalytical criticism in her study of the Oedipus myth. For her Oedipus is not ultimate meaning but only a beginning, a structure for questions, instead of a final conclusion. The Oedipus myth establishes the connection between the unconscious, repression, and narrative. "Repression is, in other words, the rejection not of instincts but of symbols, or of signifiers: their rejection through their replacement, the displacement or the transference of their original libidinal meaning onto other signifiers." Keying in on *Oedipus at Colonus*, she argues that this tragedy relates to *Oedipus the King* as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* follows *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The earlier play and work suggest a kind of finality to the issue of Oedipus and the unconscious. The later works demonstrate that for both Sophocles and Freud the process of the undermining power of the unconscious continually repeats itself. The unconscious goes beyond Oedipus to see the absence of any ultimate conclusion. Freud cannot be reduced to a theory of wish-fulfillment and Oedipus cannot be seen only in terms of self-inflicted blindness. "In both Freud and Sophocles, then, the final text narrates *the return of a riddle*." This understanding of Oedipus, which Felman derives from Lacan,