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# Language and Narcissism

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## LANGUAGE AND NARCISSISM

The intellectual and linguistic concerns of the "language poets" are both an inevitable and peculiar outgrowth of the narcissistic preoccupations of the group of writers who comprised what was called "The New York school" in the late sixties. That group included Clark Coolidge, Ted Berrigan, Lewis Warsh and others. But the phenomenon of language poetry as it has come to be known on the West Coast also owes much to earlier sources; certainly to Gertrude Stein's linguistic adventurism, Louis Zukofsky's application of the principles of music to writing, and Charles Olson's cross-breeding of poetry with philosophy. Likewise, the wide ranging perceptual plasticity and extended forms of Robert Duncan and the cryptic syllogisms of Robert Creeley are of the tradition from which the language poets arise. But there is a critical difference between the sensibility of the older writing and the new.

The new writing presumes it necessary, as Bob Perelman, a leading practitioner of language poetry, believes, to produce new meanings with old words, while in the past writers have sought to discover a new form and language which would best befit the poem's intention and meaning. Even Stein, who uncovered the secret meanings of words, began with their exact denotation as a point of departure and insisted upon concreteness. The fundamental problem with the new writing is its obsession with technique. In the effort to alter meaning, the language poets have relied on a number of devices including the grammatical mutation of prose in ways reminiscent of Burroughs, the dislocation of syntax within the line or stanza, disjunctive diction to interrupt the flow of literal meaning, and the juxtaposition of unrelated ideas, images and events. As a consequence, language poems are not unified by the intuitive flow of images or the logic of subject matter. In fact that subject of the poem is meant only to be tangential to the way it is perceived.

As the New York School trivialized experience by limiting it to the most ordinary, mundane and undramatic, the language poets trivialize language by the abstract and disjointed use of it. And though theorists of the new writing claim their method is a path away from the ego-ridden poetry whose subject is the self, almost the opposite is true. Despite the disembodiment of the personal pronoun, "I", the ego operates through the intellect which uses the poem as a means to aggrandize itself.

A singular facet of our age seems to be the deterioration of language in every aspect of public life. And there is an odd, circumstantial equivalance between the deterioration of public language as used by government and corporate bureaucracy for the purposes of obscuring meaning in the name of clarity and the obscurity that occurs in a poem when language is pushed to its limits for the purpose of creating new meanings. It could be argued that the language used by spokespersons from the Nixon Administration during the Vietnam War and the Watergate Investigation, when they lapsed into evasive, de-personalized jargon, found new meanings for old words. In order to read the language poets, the reader must share their sensibility; must be able to derive meaning or pleasure in a manner which the poem is designed to allow. Examining the text, for example, of Bruce Andrews' poem, *Praxix*, without sharing the sensibility is a baffling and tiresome task:

you are determined to  
is merely an elaboration of  
wanting you  
soonest  
the fate of  
elated with the thought of transgression  
concomitant to the sack of  
in the act of sacking  
a sudden rain  
on our backs

Andrews is excused from taking any moral responsibility for the poem's subject matter because the poem is concerned with technique, with an attitude toward language. There exists within the poem no coherent denotative meaning. Our generation, which came of age in the sixties, has had ample exposure to such denotative ambiguity. That it was evil for the Pentagon to refer to homes of the Vietnamese we bombed as "structures" and the invasion of Cambodia as an "incursion" was easy to acknowledge. But when words are disassociated from their denotations in the service of linguistic or literary theory the language poets find it all right in the service of technique. What is narcissistic in this approach is that underlying the theoretical consideration is a cool detachment that allows the poet to enjoy and flaunt his or her own intelligence. Readers who do not share the sensibility are dispensable.

Though members of the group share no unifying style, their work has a similar impersonal tone. The poems of Kit Robinson and Steve Benson, though visually surreal, emphasize the discontinuity between juxtaposed images, thus repudiating the importance of the image. Like the New York poets before them, Robinson and Benson are prone to throw good images away in an attempt to call forth the most banal associations possible from their material, as in this example from Robinson.

He brought the ladder  
The blonde weight of drag  
silenced his new personality  
He was dying to use fertilizer.

And this example from Benson:

It's afternoon and I look over white buildings  
Quite a thought I am having then  
Never understanding you when you are speaking Latin  
So why are you so soft and tender

In neither case does the poem quite commit itself to caring about the situation of which it speaks; what is explored is the way in which it has been spoken. It is narcissistic to believe that the method in which the poem is written is more important than the poem itself. The results are too often, to steal a phrase from Robinson, circular travels in a dream-like medium you find impossible to pierce.

The work of Barry Watten, Ron Silliman, and Bob Perelman is more cerebral and less visual. Perelman states that he writes with the ear in mind, but except for the patterning of sound, as in other language poets, his work is difficult to decipher:

The clear sentence the world ends  
The clear sound the water made  
The sentence is an obstacle to noise  
Ponderous forethought enables the sound to read its own mind.

Silliman has adopted a prose line in order to contain all the loose ends which abound in his writing. His work is dense with discontinuity, and like Stein and Burroughs, utilizes repetition and grammatical mutation. However his diction is flat and impersonal. The quality of interest it arouses for the reader depends purely on the quality of juxtaposition:

Because it is not normal this text is apt to be art, the abnormality is not a prior condition for art, the there is a tradition of abnormal texts as art into which this text might normally fit. A calculated refusal to perform the normal chores of verse. The "what" is an achievement term. From the barracks of the Wilcox mansion, where he took the oath, saw only the offices of doctors. Sea-sick sea serpent. Xylophones.....

Watten's work is perhaps the most abstract. It is also the most syllogistic and laconic:

There is no traffic. The traffic has stopped.  
Dreams are an accident of birth.  
I was normal. The music suggested the leg of a chair.  
The grey scale makes painting vertical. Evidently we are dead.  
The burden of classes is a twentieth century career. He can be incredibly cruel. Events are advancing at a terrifying rate.

The flight from emotional feeling is both characteristic of the language poets and our age. These writers are consciously refusing to make literature that performs the intuitive and emotional work poetry has done in the past. Though they insist on the linguistic and intellectual importance of their writing, semiotics lies outside the concern of primary poetic tradition. And despite a renewed interest among intellectuals in the philosophy of language, poetry is primarily not just an intellectual act. Like a large proportion of the generation that came of age in the sixties, the language poets are participating in the retreat of thought from feeling. As Christopher Lasch explains in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*, the narcissist "longs to free himself from his own hunger and rage, to achieve a calm detachment beyond emotion...He longs for the indifference to human relationships and to life itself."

There is a viable semiotic-influenced tradition in contemporary poetry which does not center itself on technique, but upon the exact relationship between language and perception. This poetry combines Stein's spirit of linguistic discovery with the attention to physical image making characteristic of Wallace Stevens. Practitioners of this tradition include Michael Palmer and Michael Davidson. What Palmer has shown us is amazingly subtle and beautiful:

The form of shoulder  
and the form of the word shoulder.  
The color and the blue around the color  
and the circle around the other one.  
And it becomes possible for I's  
to try the water one after one.  
One kind of wetness  
makes a white dust.

Alm Soldofsky