

Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry

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For anyone following American poetry over the last decade, it is evident that there has been an intense and contradictory response—from enthusiasm and imitation to dismissal and distortion—to our work. “Our work,” in this instance, is part of a body of writing, predominantly poetry, in what might be called the experimental or avant-garde tradition. Its history, while not nearly as canonized as the earlier example, say, of Surrealism, has been generally acknowledged along these lines: around 1970, a number of writers, following the work of such experimenters as Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky, began writing in ways that questioned the norms of persona-centered, “expressive” poetry. (In terms of its reception, “our work” can mean the writing of up to several dozen writers who have been identified as part of an aesthetic tendency whose definition is not a matter of doctrine but of overlapping affinities. Here, *we* stands for a consensus arrived at for the purposes of this article among six of its members on the West Coast.) Having come into contact with each other, many of these writers moved to New York or San Francisco, where increased interaction through the seventies and eighties led to books (a collective bibliography of around 300 titles to date), magazines, reading series, talks by poets about writing, and periodic collaborative projects including performance work and Poets Theater in San Francisco. For these writers, the interaction with others—primarily outside the universities—was exciting and affected the work of all.

In the recent history of the arts this has not been an unusual narrative. Developments of such collective activity have characterized the history of the avant-garde, including our own—recent examples being the Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, and New York schools of poetry. Resistance, too, has been characteristic of the response to the avant-gardes, but the degree of phobia has been markedly greater toward new developments in writing than to those in the other arts. While the first-generation modernist painters at the beginning of this century did set off offending shock waves, clearly the multi-story tower of the Museum of Modern Art is evidence of a certain success. More recent schools in the visual arts have been met with a more tolerant response—from benign patronage by the gallery system to instant incorporation in institutional frames. If it’s true that there are many serious

artists who have yet to be touched by the magic wand of institutional acceptance, at least those in the visual arts have grounds to contest their exclusion. This institutionalization of the avant-garde has been pointed out in such works as Rosalind Krauss's *On the Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* and Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and the notion of an "avant-garde tradition" itself is at this point an embarrassment to many in the avant-garde. Certainly the path of abstract and post-abstract painters, sculptors, video artists through the galleries and museums is no surprise to anyone.

The institutional and public response to the contemporary American literary avant garde, however, has been otherwise. The narrowness and provincialism of mainstream literary norms have been maintained over the last twenty years in a stultifyingly steady state in which the personal, "expressive" lyric has been held up as the canonical poetic form. On analogy to the visual arts, where the "avant-garde" is felt to be a virtual commonplace, the situation of poetry is as if the entire history of radical modernism—Joyce, Pound, and Williams notwithstanding—had been replaced by a league of suburban landscape painters. The elevation of the lyric of fetishized personal "experience" into a canon of taste has been ubiquitous and unquestioned—leaving those writing in other forms and to other ends operating in a no-man's-land in terms of wider critical acknowledgement and public support.

The dynamics of this antagonism between the status quo and work that does *not* share the canonical norm is revealing. While our work—at least some part of the aforementioned 300 volumes, and particularly as represented in the recent anthologies *In the American Tree* (ed. Ron Silliman) and *"Language" Poetries* (ed. Douglas Messerli) and in collections of critical work such as *Writing/Talks* (ed. Bob Perelman), *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein), and Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax*—has often received serious and useful critical attention from some sectors of the literary world, its entry into a larger public sphere has been characterized by an incoherent invective—hysterical and even phobic reactions that recall Norman Podhoretz's blast at the Beats, published in *Commentary* in the late fifties. And if this form of negative advertising to put off potentially interested readers weren't enough, there's been a minor revival of the "spectre of Communism" in red-baiting articles such as one last year in *The New Criterion* in which the use of the word *Stalin* in one of our poems sufficed to expose an apparent nest of literary Reds in San Francisco and thus to raise a signal to the New Right. This is not simply an acting out of *trashitas* (Lacan's useful term for intersubjective nihilism) for a readership in the arts; the stakes here are more consequential, as anyone aware of the uses of such political rhetoric since McCarthy knows: if would-

be rock-lyric censor Paula Hawkins had not been defeated for senator in Florida, eventually contemporary poetry may have mattered even to her. These reactions of the New Right in the arts attests to a hysteria that is a part of the dominant literary codes and in a larger sense attempt a delimitation of the aesthetically possible that has political implications—in the exclusion of differences from normative forms of communication and action.

Certainly one of the nightmares of our more phobic critics has been that our work denies the centrality of the individual artist. After all, isn't it written without a stable authorial center or perceptible narrative “voice,” in an anonymous, collective environment? The individual is seen as under attack, and this is largely true: the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing in a number of ways. What we mean by the self encompasses many things, but among these is a narrative persona, the fictive person (even in autobiography) who speaks in his or her poem about experience raised to a suitably aestheticized surface. This kind of self is readily recognizable in countless examples that bubble up from creative writing work-shops—brief narratives with moralizing codas in short poems of medium-length lines, sometimes in regular stanzaic patterns but often in free verse without rhyme, the canonical mode of poetry today. Moreover, it is not just any experience but a certain *kind* of experience that is valorized as appropriate to the “workshop effect.” Rae Armantrout, reviewing a typical recent anthology of such verse (“Mainstream Marginality,” *Poetics Journal* 6 [1986]: 141-44), writes:

Dave Smith and David Bottoms, the editors of the *Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*, include in their forward a composite portrait of the younger, American poet. They write that “he is rarely a card-carrying group member, political or aesthetic.” In this foreword Smith and Bottoms, typical younger American poets in this regard, reveal none of the aesthetic criteria around which they have shaped this book.

What is obscure in Smith and Bottoms’s theory is abundantly clear in practice, however. In his introduction to the volume, Anthony Hecht is able to draw conclusions about this generation of poets: “Their poems are not offered as the adornments of by-products of colorful or eccentric personal lives. . . . In his poems the younger poet tends to be himself, an invented version of himself.” In looking at the actual work, however, Armantrout notes a pervasive consistency that results in a leveling of “experience” to restated, commonplace themes:

Looking closer, say comparing opening stanzas, one sees, again and again, a narrative, discursive approach which places the writer physically in some particular setting, often, though not always, rustic, and begins to relate one (complexity is not favored) particular experience. Thus we see that the “typical younger American poet” is outdoors in an “abandoned” location, doing physical labor with a sharp implement. Both isolation and sharp implements seem associated in the “typical” American mind with a certain glamour. Perhaps that is what lends these poems their tones of authority and solemnity. . . . For me there is an oppressive machismo inherent in all this.

If such poets avoid “card-carrying” explicit aesthetics, it may be because they provide an ideology of no ideology, a plausible denial of intention in their work. However, it's easy to read intentions in such a project. In these examples, the maintenance of a marginal, isolated individualism is posited as an heroic and transcendent project. Experience is digested for its moral content and then dramatized and framed; at the same time, the transcendent moment dissolves back into the sentimental and banal, maintaining the purity of the poem by excluding explicit agendas. This kind of worked-over accounting of “experience,” we think, is primarily responsible for the widespread contemporary reception of poetry as nice but irrelevant. If this is what counts as significant writing, literature has completely ignored developments and insights accessible in other arts over the last seventy-five years.

Here a particular kind of self is used as the vehicle for an aesthetic project in which the specifics of experience dissolve into the pseudo-intimacy of an overarching authorial “voice.” It's worth noting that this kind of self, the dominant one in American verse practice, falls far short of Whitman's openness of self (which strikes us as much closer to a real self and its processes). In a recent article (“What is Language Poetry?” *Critical Inquiry* 12 [Summer 1986]: 741-52), Lee Bartlett runs down some of the possibilities of the workshop self in its association with the word *I*:

I have watched
Everywhere
The unregarded
Holding out
Their empty tins of justice.

Howard Moss

I learned to type ninety words a minute.
I quit the band because I wasn't stupid.
At concerts no one sat with me.

Laurie Henry

Bartlett finds these genetically related to early examples of the confessional voice poem, for which William Stafford's famous line "I thought hard for us all" might stand as a prime example. In these versions, authorial "voice" lapses into melodrama in a social allegory where the author is circumscribed from effective action by his or her very emotions.

Bartlett misses an opportunity, however, to complete his argument by countering these banalities with examples from the writers whose work he would defend:

I enjoy being slavish for in this way I conceal my deep suspicions. I enjoy all the roles I play. When the mayor hands me a dollop of praise I heckle. I turn on people when they compromise themselves in front of me. My reason is that I am a hermaphrodite. That is, my reason acts hermaphroditically. I am normal physically.

Carla Harryman

The other says: I have no method.
I merely undress in powerful moonlight
delighting the wretched few
and plunge in and drown each time.

I say: I turn to *Dallas*, to baseball, to Prince,
Sushi, fractals
—note the intrusive plane of explanation
tied up finally in some diplomatic pouch of
noncombatant pro-life pro-choice pre-ontology
movie-like stasis—I mean
a person, in quotes, on earth, quotes
sited in the aporia of toilet paper in Nicaragua
of jobs in Youngstown, if you don't already own the
shopping center then go shopping . . .

Bob Perelman

What I wanted to say was, I walk up to a block of wood,
and, covered with dust, it exaggerates a small park into
a thousand features. Fictitious powermonger tenderly
disguised as conventional boy licks lips in mirror.

Steve Benson

There is a possibility, an openness to the implications of experience, associated with the *I* here that is more generative of insight than the transcendent elevation of carefully scripted incidents. Coleridge, writing in the *Biographia Literaria*, similarly argues for a dissociation of what he calls the *ego contemplan*s—the *I* that thinks—from the *ego contemplatus*—the *I* that is the object of thought. This refusal to identify the *I* as agent with the ultimate meaning of “I,” and thus with easily perceived moral categories, elicited a symptomatically negative response from Coleridge’s readers, who, when confronted by it, “have a distinct sense of the connection between two conceptions [*e.g.*, the *I* and the “I”], without the *sensation* of such connection which is supplied by habit”—and it makes them mad. Here Coleridge attempts to describe a poetic intentionality that opposes itself to the elision of consciousness that occurs in habitual constructions of belief. It’s not difficult to arrive, from this understanding of the self as a critically necessary project, at the possibility of a dissociated self as a critique.

This is often what the use of the *I* in our work has involved—to propose, in the inherent terms of the work, that sense of a connection between discrete conceptions which has been habitually effaced from the processes of thought and language and to recharge this neurological scar tissue with some new synapses. This possibility was distinctly prefigured in the work of Robert Creeley when he observed: “As soon as/I speak, I/spcaks. It//wants to/be free but/impassive lies//in the direction/of its/words” (*Collected Poems* [Berkeley, 1984], 294), allowing him, in the critical spirit of Coleridge rather than the simply “open” one of Whitman, to write: “Poems are not referential, at least not importantly so.” (“Poems Are a Complex,” in *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays* [San Francisco, 1970], 54). This ambiguous use of the word *I* in even a poet as self-identified as Creeley led the way for many of those who read him carefully to a poetics in which more is at stake than simply the persona. The question of reference is opened by the critique of the self to processes where the self is simply not the final term.

An openness of self in the present finds language not as simply transparent and instrumental but as a necessity of the world at large—an obstacle as well as an

advantage. It would be as much philosophical nonsense, however, to say that language precedes the world as it would be to say (as Wittgenstein so thoroughly deconstructed) that the world precedes language. Enter the second obsession of the critics of our work: the use of a language that is not immediately apparent as speech. Somehow our concern for one of the defining characteristics of literature, that it is written in words, has been misread as advocating a prior textuality through which the poet avoids direct contact with, again, "experience." Just as it's been useful to consider what the *I* means in contemporary "expressivist" poetry, it is likewise instructive to examine its version of speech. In such work, a compacted persona speaks a kind of metaphorized testimonial to the validity of one's life and moral choices. It is as if a distant judge were being appealed to in modest tones intended to argue one's case in a voice just loud enough to be overheard. Propriety is the rule.

Speech, however, is a much wider field than its more narrowly literary representation, even in such a consummate artist of spoken values as William Carlos Williams. Williams's interest in American speech patterns was a reaction to the typical metrical versifying of his time as much as an enthusiasm for the possibilities of speech. What he actually wrote, however, is still greatly stylized and quite far from such examples of speech as the transcriptions of Jack Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* or Ed Friedman's *The Telephone Book*. Even "speech" on the 6 o'clock news is a rewritten idiom in which, for one thing, the redundancies, hedges, and space fillers of real speech have been completely left out. Speech values in poetry are quite far from "real" speech, an example of which might be:

This is about the most abnormal party I've ever been to. I just can't conceive of any party I've been to that we've sat around and talked like this. It's either political discussion or word meanings or something not just frivolous. You know someone will say a sentence and all of a sudden we'll say well that word doesn't mean that. You know. And we'll go on for hours over how to pronounce the word or what the word means and. (Edward C. Cartrette and Margaret Hubbard Jones, *Informal Speech* [Berkeley, 1974], 392)

It's not as if Williams's example of American idiom has been forgotten but that the distortions of contemporary "unreal" speech (as it is encountered particularly in public) have necessitated more radical idioms in response. To look at a poem like Williams's

MY LUV

My luv
is like
a
greenglass
insulator
on
a blue sky. (*Collected Poems* 1:240)

is not to see speech alone but likewise to delight in the obliqueness of such visually concrete phrases as “my luv,” “greenglass/insulator,” and “on/a blue sky.” This is equally writing (with its emphases on the physicality of words and their intertextuality) and speech, and it compares with the later and more radical example of Clark Coolidge's

time coal hum base
treat south admit
low the dissolve add
owl

from his early, ground-breaking work *Space* (1970). As in the Williams poem, written and spoken values of Coolidge's words intersect, giving not speech as heard from the mouth of Ted Koppel or even Pee Wee Herman but a display of the tonal values of English one-and-two-syllable words. What a reader will hear or read in such a poem, however, is not just sound values but the transformation of speech by writing. In order to lay bare language's inherent capacity to construct belief, it is necessary at times to disrupt its convention as communicative transparency. Writing transforms speech toward these ends; this has been a fundamental constructive principle of our work.

Beginning with Stein and Zukofsky, and significantly reinforced by the examples of the abstract poems of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery and the aleatorical texts of Jackson Mac Low in the fifties, there has been a continuity of experimental work that foregrounds its status as written language. Partly by virtue of its contribution to a critique of the self, this kind of writing became in the seventies and eighties a way to extend poetry into areas that had previously been closed to it. This development of experimental technique took place at the same time as the

historic explosion of interest in language and linguistics resulting from the work of such authors as Barthes and Kristeva. In no sense did theory precede the work; the early literary magazines of our movement were almost entirely concerned with publishing poems. It was only with the publications of the collaborative poem *Legend* (1978), the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein from 1978), and the transcripts of some of the early talks in *Hills/Talks* (1978) that theory began to take its place alongside poetry as a matter of real concern. The cognitive, and later social, uses of our practice had begun to be apparent, and this was corroborated by contemporary developments in theory. Likewise it became clear that theoretical models based on language might find a uniquely proper object in poetry. The developments of theory and poetic practice appeared to be complementary, and there seemed to be much to be learned from the relation between the two. That inquiry is still open, though it would be inaccurate to say that all experimental poets have found support for their work in theory.

So why have some poets become interested in theory? Isn't it enough to stay home and have experiences that are then written up with measured doses of poetic craft? For over two millennia poets have had explicit theoretical interests, and many of these have gone quite far beyond simple matters of technique, rhetoric, and style. Cosmogonies such as Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* are explicitly theoretical, and poetry since at least the Classical period has addressed the nature of the State. Since the Romantics language and psychology (not to mention religion) have been fundamentally implicated in poetics, and in the Modern period the necessity of such relations was focused by virtue of a skepticism about knowledge and experience that found its object in the self-sufficient word. If there is a postmodern contribution to such a progression in the arts, it has been to break down boundaries between theory and practice, experience and the work. It is sufficient to note that the "theoretical" implications of each of these periods are charged with motives that do not end only in the aesthetic.

If a wider, more inclusive address in the poem has been a central concern of our poetics, this openness to the world has taken place at a point where language occurs as a "not-I" that, by definition, is beyond the poet: Rimbaud's "Je est un autre." In its concerns for intersubjectivity, for language, and for the structure of the self prior to the self's knowledge of it, current theory addresses many questions of writing understood in this sense. For us, theory, like writing, is speculative and dynamic as opposed to institutional or normative. In our use of it, we would emphasize the prospective and question the dogmatic looking for options and constructive potentials rather than closure or limits. We propose not a "pure"

language but a “contaminated” one, testing the relations among its constituent elements and forms, from which we do not exclude theory. This is as much as to say that our writing has committed us to *more than we know*; to admit theory into our practice is to imagine what is yet to be written.

More specifically, the conjunction of linguistics, psychoanalysis, post-analytic philosophy, and social theory in the last fifteen years has led to what Thomas Kuhn would call a “paradigm shift” in both the humanities and the arts. Theory in this sense has altered the reception of the poem by changing the notion of what literature is, specifically disputing the claims that supported the previous canon by calling into question its narrow world view. In the case of the “expressivist” personal lyric discussed above, it’s the scenario of disinterested critical evaluation reinforcing the alleged moral autonomy of the poem (after the work of Eliot and the New Critics) that has suffered most in the face of these new concerns. At the same time, theory has opened up a speculative vocabulary that permits critical discussion of the work toward other ends than quasi-religious communion. It has connected writing with broader realms of intellectual discourse and has staked out a space for creative writers as equals with serious thinkers in other areas to the advantage of the poet. Writers of an earlier generation such as Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, and Laura Riding were, we think, among the foremost theorists of their time. Our interest in recent theory is an extension of that same refusal to separate critical from creative practice.

In particular, the concern with theory has drawn our work outward from the aesthetics of the “self-sufficient word” to more explicitly social and political issues. Starting with the Ron Silliman’s essay “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World” (1976) and with the “Politics of the Referent” symposium in *Open Letter* edited by Steve McCaffery (1977), our engagement with theory at first looked for analogies between the structure of language and social reality. This was contemporaneous with the reception of such European Marxists as Poulantzas, Althusser and Macherey, with the revival of the work of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, with increasing interest in the Russian Formalists and French Structuralists (particularly through Fredric Jameson’s *The Prison-House of Language*), with developments in post-generative cognitive linguistics (the work of Berkeley linguists Charles Fillmore and George Lakoff), and with the first impact of deconstruction and French feminism. Anyone familiar with these issues will recognize that these influences do not, as yet, add up to a single, stable position. Rather it’s been one task of contemporary poetics to explore their implications in the practice of an art.

What does this theory look like in practice? As one example, Bruce Andrews wrote in the *Open Letter* symposium:

Language-centered work resembles an active myth-making. It resembles a creation of a community and of a world-view by once-divided-but-now-fused Reader and Writer. This creation is not instrumental. It is immanent, in plain sight (and plainsong), moving along a surface with all the complications of a charter or a town-meeting. (“Text and Context,” *Open Letter*, 3rd ser., no. 7 [Summer 1977]: 82)

Clearly utopian, like much poetry, this kind of theory aspires to a poetics that ends not in a text but in the implication of that text for the world, the everyday lives of real people. At the same time, the “material sign” is felt to be central to such a possibility. The value of this notion of language as material has not remained fixed, however, and it is of interest now to look back at the development of the idea in the theoretical writings of our movement as well as in Andrews’s work. Certainly the utopian dimension of the “material sign” has come under a great deal of criticism in this group, but its residue continues to have implications for practice. In his most recent book, one misses the utopian covenant between Reader and Writer but not the alienation of material practice that produced:

Hitsville!—Well I m not exposed enough, no matter how vain *you* are—As if
wedding talk anarchic cakes in the home turns to rebels, go outside and vomit,
torpor lifts over working class Pavlov's dog
Failure to acknowledge seems like a natural fact

(*Give Em Enough Trope*, 82)

The opposite of utopia, plus ten years, would seem here to be total estrangement. What Andrews has learned from this project, as hard as it may be to take, is virtually constitutive of contemporary public space: “Failure to acknowledge seems like a natural fact.” Here is a debunking of the transparency of administered communication, not in a discursive work along the lines of Marcuse or Adorno, but at the very sight or utterance of these words. By extension one finds that this language, and much that is like it, exists everywhere in the world—but do we see it acknowledged? There is a kind of social unconscious, of what cannot be admitted as a primary perception of the reality of American life, behind the cleaned-up and marketable products of much art. Andrews’s writing returns us to an important aspect of the real, one that would not have come into poetry without the risks posed by

theory—and it isn't necessarily pretty. But it is significant, and here we *are* acknowledging it, as a duality of alienated public and interested community that particularly concerns us.

If there has been one premise of our group that approaches the status of a first principle, it has been not the “self-sufficiency of language” or the “materiality of the sign” but the reciprocity of practice implied by a community of writers who read each other's work. In mainstream poetry such a community, rather than being a group of individuals, is a set of institutional norms—the replaceable components of workshop reading circuits, summer writing programs, and appreciative reviews—but it still shares an explicit set of assumptions; it is a literary school. What seems so troubling about our tendency is that its social constitution is not hidden behind the kinds of “neutral” evaluations of poetic competence that are reflected in practice as “craft.” After all, in order to have one's poem accepted by a magazine such as *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, or *The New Yorker*, there is supposed to be a disinterested standard of judgment embodied in some individual who can judge. This anxiety over judgment runs the creative writing business—“Is my version of experience good enough?” “Not yet!”—and the masters of this patient rebuttal disappear down the halls of academe, worried-over manuscripts in hand. Here we have a kind of institutional atomization that stands in for an individual sensibility based on implicit norms. This is precisely the opposite of explicit agency in the arts—the claim of the value of one's work, appealing not to such “judgment” but to other measures of efficacy. Aesthetic tendency—the politics of *intention*—as opposed to aesthetic arbitration, offers an entirely different way of seeing the poem as produced and received. It explicitly proposes a different order of methods and values, very unlike—to use the jargon of the arts bureaucracies—the *excellence* that admits neither social affiliations nor theoretical claims. This distinction between judgment and intention is well reflected in the social formations of the art—on the one hand, the hierarchies of “disinterested” submission and acceptance in the mainstream poetry journal and on the other the peer politics of interested affiliation found in groups such as ours.

We don't want to be shy about this—we want to be in contact with other writers whose work we think is worthwhile; we want to learn something from them. That's why we advocate freedom of association, and through that freedom, within the economy of means of any social process, comes the dynamics of a literary school. It's a part of a mutual, collective finding out not formally defined by abstract judgment. And, by extension, we assume that other writers and groups ideally would pursue their ends in similar ways. Still, many writers and critics proclaim a radical aversion

to groups, often stated in overtly ideological terms that oppose individual to collective practice. At its extreme, we are reminded of the recent retirement speech of Marine Corps General Paul X. Kelley, who observed that the moral fiber of the nation was being threatened by the collectivism imposed on preschoolers by the day-care system. This apotheosis of psychological reductionism (society is not your real mom) stands in for a wide range of personal expressions of antipathy toward society. Such rehashed rugged individualism has its equivalents in poetic discourse. Robert Duncan, certainly no Marine Corps general, recently likened our tendency to “a crowd of mosquitoes over someone else's swamp” (*Sagetrieb* 4, nos. 2-3 [Fall/Winter 1985]); we think this characterization of a literary group as a (collective) swarm of insects evokes certain mass-psychological resonances that Duncan should have been more aware of. But there is a flip side to this discursive formation—the implied territorial claim on literature as “not *their* swamp.” What initially seems to be a defense of the sovereign individual turns out to be a fight over the literary with a big L, specifically who is and is not to be admitted into the canon.

We think poetry in the United States should be big enough to admit many schools of thought, which is why we feel we can pursue the issues raised by our own. What is surprising is the nature of the reaction: pursuing one's own interest, as a participant in a social milieu, is felt to threaten a social totality which is already otherwise *claimed*. The next step is repression, and it is no accident that raising the specter of a “group” was immediately followed by a marked decrease in the support for experimental writers, publishers, and programs, particularly through the National Endowment for the Arts.

While we are flagrantly writing this article as a group, the perceptive reader will already have noticed that until this point neither the “Language School” nor “Language Poetry” has been named. This is no accident; the politics of group identity are a problem (and challenge) particularly for those alternately identified within and without it. We would all, in short, admit to being primarily interested in our own work—but does that release us, or it, from social context? In a recent interview, Michael Palmer, a poet who has appeared in all the major magazines and anthologies of our tendency but who at the same time expresses reservations about literary groups, was careful to distance himself from the market implications of such group identity while at the same time speculating on the historical value of his liminal relation to it:

My relationship to the Language poets is this: first, there is a certain disservice that's been performed, partly by themselves, in grouping a fairly diverse

community of writers under that rubric for the sake of self-presentation. They came along at a certain point and were generous toward work such as mine....

Who or what decides who “they” are; who or what defines membership in a group? Is the determining fact social affinity or style—or an explicit agenda? If the grouping of “a fairly diverse community of writers” is arbitrary, perhaps Palmer's distinguishing himself from it is arbitrary as well. He continues:

Likewise, I would say that the way I inhabit language, or language inhabits me, is in a sense more traditional than the way through procedural models that many of the so-called Language Poets work. In that respect, I'm a little bit outside, just as a Matisse or a Rilke would be outside the ongoing schools. (*Talking Poetry*, ed. Lee Bartlett [Albuquerque, NM, 1987], 130-31)

It's clear that the notion of a group has conflicting uses for Palmer. As an individual he can stand outside it as the sole author of his works—shared influences such as Stein, Zukofsky, and Creeley notwithstanding—while in history he can define himself in relation to a collective style, as in the examples given above. But already the notion of a group is doing its work—calling into question the meaning of style and putting its mark on historical time. Collectivity in this sense is as much a source of value as the individual author. This dialectic is charged—how much social definition can one writer admit?—but it is also part of the implicit meaning of both individuals and groups. Individual writers are defined in relation to collective processes for Palmer, and at least in this article we are arguing for the significance of a group against the canonical individual of the “expressivist” tendency, itself a social movement.

If the alienating processes of social atomization (the constructing of individuals simultaneous with the denial of a number of group identities—as, for instance, social class, ethnicity, gender, and explicit politics) have been an unacknowledged basis of institutional “expressivist” aesthetics, they have likewise been a primary focus of our practice. The difference is that rather than producing more social atoms along the lines of the poets represented in the *Morrow Anthology of Younger Poets*, we want to point out the process and its implications for issues that transcend the narrow elevation of personal experience to standards of taste and judgment. This has involved specific arguments about the nature of social reality and a person's place in it, and it has produced a poetry whose formal values may be the obverse of the autonomous, New Critical lyric. In the course of our work over the last several years, a congruence of method outside the “self-sufficient poem” has opened up new possibilities of agency for the poet. This has come to pass by virtue of the

On the heads of panel members
To signify state of the art
For multiple reentry target
At 300 meters,

I look up ...

Barrett Watten

Clog hours measure, that broad duration, that
morning's unit of content
Clocks cross points quaver value; I *am* judging;
the poem *could* be
A unit of cognition poised within and a term in
moral philosophy
Hourly intimately shifting blades with total
veracity as I describe an idea
That is, in my language; a cup; the very grass and
encounter
The clairvoyant might uncover—bending worldwide
with squinting, headlong, in my head

Lyn Hejinian

“The poet thinks with [her] poem,” Williams wrote, but this can mean a more exploratory role for the writer than the well-intentioned moralist who thinks “hard for us all” or the partisan of the past who wants poetry to remain unaffected—in either form or content—by the world as it has changed.

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