

*In early March 1981, Lyn sent a letter to Barrett, Bob, Charles Bernstein, Ron, and Steve, proposing that each would write a page on a topic that she named, the whole to serve as an introduction to a selection of Language writings in French translation that would appear in Change magazine, as part of the March 1982 issue focused on “L'espace amérique,” edited (with an additional introduction) by Nanos Valaoritis. In 1989, our same six-person introduction was retranslated into Serbian and published in an issue of Delo, in Yugoslavia. Here is the six-person introduction.*

**Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Steve Benson, Lyn Hejinian,  
Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman**

Begun in the sixties, the writing of the American poets gathered here for Change matured into an organized, ongoing literary discourse in the following decade, a period of significant transition for the United States. From the perspective of capital, the war in Indochina was lost, a critical blow to national military prestige. More importantly, 1974 marked the end of capital's longest “boom,” the expansionist years following the Second World War (on top of which the essential optimism of every variety of “New American” poetry had been constructed). Simultaneously, the largest generation in U.S. history, the “baby boom” of the 40's and early 50's, passed from college to the daily practices of material life. Tied to that generation and crippled from the beginning by its rejection of historical knowledge, the American New Left rapidly dissolved, although several of its veterans were to re-emerge as leaders of cross-class movements based on forms of personal oppression, as women or as gays of either sex. This moment also saw the first resignation of an American president. For writers, persons constituted as “individual subjects” by their social context, and as subjects of a specific type, previous assumptions were shown to be false. Career expectations, within literature and elsewhere, for example, had been socially imposed with no real comprehension of the impact of technological innovation and the resulting recomposition of American class structure. Both the writer and (any potential) audience found themselves displaced, their existence in jeopardy. In such a context, it is no accident that poets such as this Change grouping should turn their attention to the origin of this displacement, the constituting mechanism of “private life,” language itself.

R.S.

“New form means new content.” The congruence of the writings presented here is evidence of a break with prior meanings. For example, the New York School, an immediate predecessor, aestheticized language “as such.” In John Ashbery’s *The Tennis Court Oath*, and often in Frank O’Hara, language appears as a material applied to a surface; the analogy is to paint. However, the early work of Clark Coolidge changed the potential of language “as material.” Words are the axis rather than the works of art; Coolidge’s disciplined, extensive writings extend art into language rather than narrow language to art. Similarly, the “organic form” of the postmodern Romantics, beginning with Olson and Creeley, which makes writing an act “in process,” has been completely rethought. An ethical concern with the “fate of the trace” has returned “process” values to the exterior world in the work of Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, and Steve Benson. Out of this ethical concern, much of the writing presented here addresses direct perception rather than prior literary examples; an early instance of this is in the work of Robert Grenier, where the attack on lyricism in Creeley’s *Pieces* is transformed into an attack on the word. This phenomenological basis for writing, implied in the work of the Russian Formalists, connects the work of the American modernist masters of the “word as such,” Williams, Zukofsky, and Stein, to the illusionist or constructivist values to be found in Michael Palmer, Bruce Andrews, or Barrett Watten. Exteriorized writing procedures, from sources as different as the cut-up technique of Burroughs and the chance methods of Cage, discover in much of this work both radical psychologies and the insistence on fact. Ethics have been refracted from style; the progress of the work in the last decade reflects this. It has been the writing itself, rather than theory, which has led to further results. Publication in literary magazines and small presses, such as *Tottel’s* (edited by Ron Silliman), *This* (Barrett Watten and Robert Grenier), *A Hundred Posters* (Alan Davies), *Tuumba*, (Lyn Hejinian), *Roof* (James Sherry), and *Hills*, (Bob Perelman), has preceded the articulation of theory in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein) and in the *Talks* (the San Francisco Talk Series, organized by Bob Perelman). In fact, attempts at a program seem to divide the stylistic congruence into dissimilar intents. But from the point of view of the writing, there has been a recognition at a point in time: style has an ethical rather than aesthetic basis, and the act of writing is set up on a different axis as a result. The writing presented here is clearly a synchronic phenomenon; the important question is the present which it reflects.

B.W.

The works of these writers challenge and confront one another, criticizing and reconstituting the structure of an unwieldy body of work, aware by a network of personal and professional associations of its function as a resonant chamber as much as as an agent of publicity. Having integrated the impact of the post-World-War-II protest movements both as critiques of authority and as arguments for rights and prizing an awkwardly marginal status in the corporate hegemony, these writers have developed strategies that test more markedly than they indoctrinate, resist rather than seduce or assure; apparent units within their works often function by apparently nonprogrammatic and yet highly intentional juxtapositions such that principles of opposition and analysis are integrated and face off against circumstances including the reader, who is proffered no code to break nor transparently methodical procedure to appreciate. The abrasive assertiveness and lack of agreement among persons of warmly shared interests encourages them to reconsideration of individual custom. The truism that the only people who now read poetry are themselves poets is thus understood rather as potential than as limitation; the reader is presumed not as a consumer of the experience sustained by the poem but as a fellow writer who shares contentiously in the work and can willingly answer the uses of the medium which the author feels impelled to undertake (and so extend the generation of literary work without indulging the pretentious fireworks of avantgardism for validation, with its tendencies to shortsightedness of enthusiasm and blindness of shock effect). Within this group collaborations on composed texts are numerous and diverse in form and method; the emphatic and critical recognition they bring to magazine anthologies, public readings, talks, performances, and even correspondence as objectified and significantly collaborative works bespeaks a particularly positive valuation for the parameter of interaction between parties engaged in literary acts. The social functions of language are crucially material to the interest in writing; these writers are highly sensitive to the ubiquity of sources and receptors and markedly propose conscious value to what could otherwise be taken as impingements in a literature of autonomous display.

**S.B.**

It is useful, here, to consider the writer as the first and immediate reader of his or her own writing. The writer goes more than halfway to meet lines or sentences advancing on their own. The language itself materializes thought; the writing realizes ideas. One discovers what one thinks, sees, says, and as the words unfold the work, the work, directed by form, extends outward. Language in writing such as that collected here is no longer an intermediary between the writer and the world or between the concept of the work and content. Language is not the instrument of expression but the substance. It is inseparable from the world, since it is in the nature of language to be entangled in a system of reference and cross-reference. In a work such as Ron Silliman's one paragraph prose block, *SITTING UP, STANDING, TAKING STEPS*, the unit is what's contained between the initial capital and the period, that is, the sentence. It is a sentence which lacks a verb yet remains active, even restless, and in the present tense. "Along the coast, on cats, in coats. A warm new storm. Blue ink on a white page between red lines." This is not a diarist's record of observed detail; no eye ("I") could be thus ubiquitous. It is the realism of language, language under pressure, fully present. In works such as those collected here, content is not imposed from without; rather, it emerges from independent initial points in the language itself. This method of composition, for that's what it really is, guarantees the possibility of a proliferation of works whose writers insist on their independence from any fixing program or orthodoxy. Their work avoids the reductive (one notes the distaste for closure) and remains full of expectation. In a brief discussion of Bruce Andrews' one line poem (published in *The Paris Review* in 1972), "*Bananas are an example*," Nanos Valaoritis writes, "In what way does this sentence differ from the poetic metaphor of the modernist style? It is that it is truncated. An "example" of what? The sentence remains open, available to multiple continuation. It thrusts polysemanticism into an new space. It is no longer a question of allusive obscurities, as in Pound, Eliot, and Olson, nor of the metaphorical system of surrealism .... It addresses in the present the ambiguity that language itself possesses and requires collaboration from the reader."

L.H.

Theory is never more than the extension of practice: the work of these poets has developed primarily in relation to the materials with which they work, informed not only by the synchronic activities of other active writers and the various traditions of literary writing but significantly by far larger frames of writing and art activity current and past. Critical forums for these writers — such as *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* or *Hills/Talks* — have been investigations in a manner similar to the work of the “poetry” itself, where writing and the meaning of its modes are actively engaged: no manifestos, no formulation of underlying principles, not “how to write” apart from the writing itself that at any moment has no claim except as another instance. So, implicitly, an interrogation of the meaning of any mode — of “poetry” or “theory” — and an acknowledgement that there is no escape from composition, no logic on which to base the work other than the sense developed ongoing in the actual activity itself. Critical forums have been a way to open up beyond correspondence and conversation the dialogue between the writers themselves — an exchange of “working” information — and to include in this discussion those not primarily involved with poetry, such as other artists, and political and cultural workers, and to suggest possible relationships between the poetry and recent critical and philosophical thought. In this sense, such “critical writing” has often had a different address and a different audience than the “poetry” itself while at the same time basing itself in the poetic practice and serving to generate interest and insight into that work.

C.B.

This writing does not concern itself with narrative in the conventional sense. Story, plot, any action outside the syntactic and tonal actions of the words is seen as secondary. Attempts to posit an idealized narrative time would only blur perception of the actual time of writing and reading. Persona, Personism, the poem as trace of the poet-demiurge — these, too, are now extraneous. The functions that narrative had fulfilled, those of creating and resolving tension, introducing material, motivating sequence, are now dealt with more directly by a variety of procedures. A priori forms and lengths may be determined. Specific areas of vocabulary and syntax, or modes of patterning will be investigated.

Narrative-like elements do arise naturally, even from the most steady-state, fractal works. Clark Coolidge's as yet unnamed "long work" moves through areas of vocabulary and subject which are recapitulated in a kind of hyper sonata form. Ron Silliman's prose books reflect, of necessity, the sequence of outer events from which his sentences are often quarried. A deliberately impure narrative occurs in the prose of Lyn Hejinian and Bob Perelman, where memory and writing time interface. There is a similar meeting in some of Charles Bernstein's pieces, where a father's or aunt's self-narrating, self-limiting language is embedded in the poet's less coded syntax. Steve Benson's work often includes bits of autobiographical story as a textural element; many of these writers use language from older narratives similarly.

The most direct investigations of narrative have been Carla Harryman's work, in which a narrative can often be discerned, though it will be refracted and redefined by her language's self-scrutiny. In some works Bob Perelman has presented strings of narrative device without matching narrative content. In some of Peter Seaton's pieces the ghost of a narrative still lingers, not quite effaced by other signal-noise.

This writing has been laying bare the devices of statement and signification, exploring and elaborating new possibilities of syntax. Of necessity, extending this investigation beyond the sentence approaches and redefines narrative.

B.P.