

# Postmodern American Poetry

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## Complete Introduction (pp. xxv-xxxix)

### 1

The poet Charles Olson used the word "postmodern" as early as an October 20, 1951, letter to Creeley from Black Mountain, North Carolina. Doubting the value of historical relics when compared with the process of living, Olson states: "And had we not, ourselves (I mean postmodern man), better just leave such things behind us--and not so much trash of discourse, & gods?"<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the term has received increasing acceptance in all areas of culture and the arts; it has even come to be considered a reigning style. As used here, "postmodern" means the historical period following World War II. It also suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life in writing. Postmodernist poetry is the avant-garde poetry of our time. I have chosen "postmodern" for the title over "experimental" and "avant-garde" because it is the most encompassing term for the variety of experimental practice since World War II, one that ranges from the oral poetics of Beat and performance poetics to the more "writerly" work of the New York School and language poetry.

Avant-garde art, according to critic Peter Bürger, opposes the bourgeois model of consciousness by attempting to close the gap between art and life. However, "an art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it."<sup>2</sup> Vanguardism thus collaborates with nineteenth-century aestheticism in the diminishment of art's social function even as it attempts to advance it. The risk is that the avant-garde will become an institution with its own self-protective rituals, powerless to trace or affect the curve of history.

This anthology shows that avant-garde poetry endures in its resistance to mainstream ideology; it is the avant-garde that renews poetry as a whole through new, but initially shocking, artistic strategies. The "normal" way of writing, such as the contemporary habit of free verse, is first the practice of a few innovators. By this reasoning, recent postmodern aesthetics like performance poetry and language poetry will influence mainstream practice in the coming decades. However, because centrist practice is hostile to change, belatedness is also a feature of avant-garde poetry in terms of publishing opportunities and literary prizes. It was not until the mid-1950s, when William Carlos Williams was in his seventies, that he finally received significant recognition. Until then, his work was considered "antipoetic." Yet much American poetry since that time has been written on the Williams model.

The critic Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernism represents a break with nineteenth-century romanticism and early twentieth-century modernism. In his words, postmodernism is characterized by "aesthetic populism," "the deconstruction of expression," "the waning of affect," "the end of the bourgeois ego," and "the imitation of

dead styles" through the use of pastiche.<sup>3</sup> In Jameson's opinion, postmodernism is the perfect expression of late capitalist culture as dominated by multinational corporations. If Jameson is correct, "deconstruction of expression" would be symptomatic of the loss of individuality in a consumer society. The reputed death of the author would reflect the decline of colonialism and central authority in general. As history finds its "end" in liberal democracy and consumerism, it loses its sense of struggle and discovery. This results in an affectless or "blank" style. Similarly, Jameson's "aesthetic populism" would reflect the triumph of mass communications over the written word.

An opposing argument to Jameson's is that postmodernism is an extension of romanticism and modernism, both of which still thrive. Thus what Jameson calls pastiche is simply a further development of modernist collage--today's cultural pluralism can be identified in *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and Picasso's cubist appropriation of the ceremonial masks of Benin; the self-reflexiveness of postmodern art can be found in *Finnegans Wake* and as far back as *Tristram Shandy*; performance poetry is simply the most recent of many attempts, including those of Wordsworth and William Carlos Williams, to renew poetry through the vernacular. The poetry of John Ashbery is quintessentially postmodern, yet it is influenced by the modernist romantic Wallace Stevens and the modernist Augustan W. H. Auden. John Cage's use of the "prepared piano" and his emphasis on indeterminacy in language represent high postmodernism, yet they can also be situated, along with the aeolian harp, in the history of romanticism.

This anthology does not view postmodernism as a single style with its departure in Pound's *Cantos* and its arrival in language poetry; postmodernism is, rather, an ongoing process of resistance to mainstream ideology. In the 1960s, in opposition to the impersonal, Augustan poetry encouraged by the New Criticism, the postmodern revolt was primarily in the direction of a personal, oral, and "organic" poetry. Frank O'Hara's injunction, "You just go on your nerve,"<sup>4</sup> called for an improvisatory poetics of the everyday that was essentially neo-romantic. Yet, in its intense casualness, his poetry also argued against the romantic concept of self; in its disdain for the metaphysical, it broke with the "transcendental signified." By the late 1970s, a new generation of postmodernists had either challenged a speech-based poetics by means of language poetry or extended spoken poetry into performance poetry. Despite their differences, experimentalists in the postwar period have valued writing-as-process over writing-as-product. They have elevated the pluralistic, which Charles Olson called "the real biz of reality," over the singular, which Olson called "the whole ugly birth of the 'either-or.'"<sup>5</sup> Postmodernism decenters authority and embraces pluralism. It encourages a "panoptic" or many-sided point of view. Postmodernism prefers "empty words" to the "transcendental signified," the actual to the metaphysical. In general, it follows a constructionist rather than an expressionist theory of composition. Method and intuition replace intention. With the death of God and the author, appropriation becomes a reigning device. Having no conclusion to come to, narrative doubles back on itself with overlapping and sometimes contradictory versions. For example, Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) consists of the first chapters of ten novels, none of which is developed or concluded. What a text means has more to do with how it was written than with what it expresses. As Robert Creeley has written, "Meaning is not importantly referential."<sup>6</sup> Quoting Charles Olson, Creeley continues, "That which exists through itself is what is called the meaning."<sup>7</sup> Thus the material of art is to be judged simply as



material, not for its transcendent meaning or symbolism. In general, postmodern poetry opposes the centrist values of unity, significance, linearity, expressiveness, and a heightened, even heroic, portrayal of the bourgeois self and its concerns. The poetry in this volume employs a wide variety of oppositional strategies, from the declaratory writings of the Beats to the more theoretical but fiercely political work of the language poets. The empty sign, like the use of transgressive material or aleatory composition, is but one means of that resistance.

2

In his poem "The Rest" (1913), Ezra Pound alluded to the United States as a culturally backward country: "Artists broken against her, / A-stray, lost in the villages . . ."8 But by the end of World War II, the United States had become the primary exporter, as well as market, for advanced ideas in the arts. Today the young Ezra Pound would leave his Philadelphia suburb of Wyncote not for London and Paris, but rather The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery, San Francisco's New Langton Arts, or the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe. His work would be published in such magazines as *Sulfur*, *Conjunctions*, *New American Writing*, *O-BLEK*, *Temblor*, *The World*, and *Hambone*, and his books would be published by such presses as Black Sparrow, Coffee House, North Point, The Figures, City Lights, Kulchur, The Jargon Society, Burning Deck, Sun & Moon, and Roof, which have joined New Directions in their commitment to avant-garde writing. In short, since 1950, the year Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse" appeared, innovative poetry in the United States has flourished.

In analyzing American poetry after 1945, it is traditional to point to the so-called battle of the anthologies that occurred with the publication of *New Poets of England and America* (1962), edited by Donald Hall and Robert Pack, and *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (1960), edited by Donald M. Allen. The former put forth a literature that was more traditional, formal, and refined. Its contributors were schooled in the assumptions of the New Criticism, which held that poems are well-made objects to be judged independently of the author's intentions or personal experiences. Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* placed emphasis on the poem's craftsmanship and traditional subject matter, as well as, implicitly, its white, upper-middle-class constituency. To use Robert Lowell's terminology, the poetry of the Hall/Pack anthology was more "cooked" than "uncooked." Trusting in tradition, its contributors were not eager to reject the influence of British letters in favor of a home-grown idiom. Yeats was preferred to Williams, the mythical to the personal, the rational to the irrational, the historical to the contemporary, learnedness to spontaneity, elitism to populism. However, the early confessional poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were included in the Hall/Pack volume, an indication that New Criticism's demand for objectivity and critical distance was already under question. Robert Pack's introduction to his section of American poets under forty (Hall selected the British poets) shows his distaste for spontaneous poetry:

The idea of raw, unaffected, or spontaneous poetry misleads the reader as to what is expected of him. It encourages laziness and passivity. He too can be spontaneous, just sit back and respond. A good poem, rather, is one that deepens upon familiarity .... It is not enough to

let a poem echo through your being, to play mystical chords upon your soul. The poem must be understood and felt in its details; it asks for attention before transport.<sup>9</sup>

Pack sides here with the formalism of the New Criticism, which required consistency of structure and poetic detail. Positioning himself against the romanticism of Beat poetry, he emphasizes "attention" (the close-reading style of New Criticism) and "familiarity" (tradition). He implies that the only worthwhile poems are those which lend themselves to study. His disdain for the "laziness and passivity" of certain readers comes perilously close to a social-class distinction. The overall defensiveness of the introduction suggests that the new poetry had already begun to make its mark.

It was in 1955, five years before publication of the Donald Allen anthology, that the San Francisco Renaissance burst on the scene with a single momentous reading at Six Gallery. Jack Kerouac described the event in *Dharma Bums*:

Anyway I followed the whole gang of howling poets to the reading that night, which was, among other important things, the night of the birth of the San Francisco Renaissance. Everyone was there. It was a mad night. And I was the one who got things jumping by going around collecting dimes and quarters from the rather stiff audience standing around the gallery and coming back with three huge gallon jugs of California burgundy and getting them all puffed so that by eleven o'clock when Alvah Goldbrook [Allen Ginsberg] was reading his, wailing his poem "Wail" drunk with arms outspread everybody was yelling Go! Go! Go!" (like a jam session). . . 10

In fact, as poet and critic Michael Davidson points out, there had been earlier activity in San Francisco. As early as 1944, Robert Duncan had begun to set the stage for a publicly gay role in literature by publishing his essay "The Homosexual in Society." In 1949, Jack Spicer wrote, "We must become singers, become entertainers," a prophecy of the Beat movement's return of poetry to its bardic roots.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1920s, Kenneth Rexroth had been a significant avant-garde figure in the Bay area, organizing "at homes" for writers and artists and reading poetry to jazz long before the Beat poets made the activity popular. The Six Gallery reading galvanized media interest in a variety of alternative poetries. It also introduced the concept of poetry as public performance, one that is increasingly dominant in an age of television and rock and roll.

If Robert Pack's model poet "deepens upon familiarity," Donald Allen's model poet deepens upon strangeness, preferring the irrational and spontaneous to the decorous and well made. In the tradition of Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, the poets in Allen's anthology also emphasized the American idiom and landscape. Although predominantly male, many of these poets were Jewish, Irish, Italian, black, and gay--that is, from "new" ethnic and social groups. They lived primarily in New York City and San Francisco, where they were influenced by the other arts, especially jazz and painting. None of them taught at a university. The distinction between bohemia and academia was clear in 1960. Today that difference is harder to establish, as many avant-gardists make their living by university teaching. The radicalism that inspired many poets of the 1960s has found expression in critical approaches such as feminism, post-structuralism, and multiculturalism that are increasingly central to the study of liberal arts.

The most public of the new poetries was the Beat movement led by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The word "Beat," suggesting exhaustion, beatitude, and the jazz improvisation that inspired



many of its writers, was first used by Jack Kerouac. Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), written on a continuous roll of teletype paper, provided the Beat model of spontaneous composition. "Not 'selectivity' of expression," Kerouac insisted, "but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thoughts."<sup>12</sup> In Ginsberg's *Howl*, this verbal improvisation and jazz sense of measure can be heard in lines such as "ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind." According to Ginsberg, Kerouac believed that "the gesture he made in language was his mortal gesture, and therefore unchangeable."<sup>13</sup> It could no more be revised than the act of walking across a room. Spontaneous composition is not, however, without discipline. "What this kind of writing proposes," Ginsberg once said, "is an absolute, almost Zen-like, complete absorption, attention to your own consciousness . . . so that the attention does not waver while writing, and doesn't feed back on itself and become self-conscious."<sup>14</sup> With its roots in the poetry of Blake, Whitman, and William Carlos Williams, Beat writing is public, direct, performative, ecstatic, agonized, oral, and incantatory. It is both irreverent and spiritually aware. Ginsberg's "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" search for meaning high and low. Ginsberg experimented with drugs, was expelled from Columbia University for writing an obscenity on the window of his dorm room, and spent time in the psychiatric ward of Rockland State Hospital. At a time that demanded form, decorum, refinement, and impersonality, Ginsberg's poetry was vivid, direct, profane, personal, and declamatory. The "secret hero" of *Howl* is Neal Cassady, also immortalized as Dean Moriarty of *On the Road*, who lived the exuberant and ultimately self-destructive life the bohemian tradition so admires. In 1968, Cassady died in Mexico at age forty-one from a lethal mixture of alcohol and sleeping pills; Kerouac died the following year. By 1975, the Beat influence had been largely subsumed by the Hippie movement. Nevertheless, poets like Ginsberg and Snyder continue to enjoy a wide following. The thriving presence of performance poetry on the current scene has also helped sustain interest in the Beats.

Central figures of the New York School are John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. Most attended Harvard; all but Koch were gay; and all lived in Manhattan. Strongly influenced by French experimental writing, especially the novels of eccentric amateur Raymond Roussel, they founded the magazines *Locus Solus* and *Art and Literature* and set upon the most self-consciously nonprogrammatic program of the period. However, something of a general stance can be found in O'Hara's essay "Personism: A Manifesto," a parody of Charles Olson's "Projective Verse." O'Hara stated that one day in 1959, while writing a poem for a specific person, he realized that he could "use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born."<sup>15</sup> Personist poetry speaks with immediacy and directness of everyday experience, in everyday language. O'Hara's statement, "You just go on your nerve," is reminiscent of the spontaneity and antiformalism of the Beats; his insistence that Personism "does not have to do with personality or intimacy"<sup>16</sup> suggests an affinity for the poem as a work of art rather than a means of expression. But the Personist mode is not characteristic of all New York School poetry. John Ashbery's use of the novel, sestina, and pantoum combines traditional forms with an innovative impulse and tone. Kenneth Koch wrote his comic epics *Ko* and *The Duplications* in ottava rima, the stanza of Byron's *Don Juan*. Like Byron, Koch and the rest of the New York School poets admire wit, daring, urbanity, and an offhanded elegance. As courtly eccentrics, they set a tone that is distinct from the

earnest bohemianism of the Beats. A characteristic New York School project is Harry Mathews's sestina "Histoire," the end words of which include "militarism," "Marxism-Leninism," "fascism," and "Maoism." Awed by the oddness of the project, the reader shares the author's triumph over the formal problem. Form becomes, in effect, the primary content of the work. New York School poetry reveals a fondness for parody (Koch's "Variations on a Theme of William Carlos Williams") and pop culture (Ashbery's Popeye sestina, "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape"). It also works within the avant-garde tradition of the "poet among the painters." As a curator for the Museum of Modern Art and organizer of major exhibits, Frank O'Hara was the Apollinaire of New York painting in the late fifties and early sixties. John Ashbery was editor of *ART-news*, and James Schuyler was a frequent contributor to *Art in America*.

It is important to note the leading role of John Ashbery in American poetry since the publication of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). Perhaps because his poetry expresses the period's most important theme, indeterminacy, Ashbery has become a "major poet" in an age suspicious of the term. Indeterminacy means the conditionality of truth, as well as a compositional tendency away from finality and closure; the text is in a state of unrest or undecidability. Characterized by sudden shifts of tone and a wide range of reference, making frequent use of the self-canceling statement, Ashbery's poetry has the capacity, to quote Frank O'Hara, for "marrying the whole world."<sup>17</sup> Through circuitousness and obliqueness, Ashbery alludes to things in the process of avoiding them; in saying nothing, he says everything. In the words of critic and poet David Lehman, "Ashbery's poetry points toward a new mimesis, with consciousness itself as a model.<sup>18</sup> Mimesis refers to representation in art—for example, the ability of a painter to make an apple look like an apple. Ashbery paints a picture of the mind at work rather than the objects of its attention. Ashbery has remarked, "Most reckless things are beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing."<sup>19</sup>

In the late sixties a second generation of New York School poets, including Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Anne Waldman, Tom Clark, Bernadette Mayer, and Maureen Owen, came into their strength. Through readings at St. Mark's Church on the Lower East Side and through journals such as *The World*, *Telephone*, and *C*, they brought a more bohemian tone to New York School "dailiness" and wit. As self-appointed pope of the scene, Ted Berrigan influenced a large number of younger poets. His book *The Sonnets* (1964), a classic of the period, applied the cut-up method of Dada (and of Beat novelist William Burroughs) to the sonnet form. With Ron Padgett, Berrigan wrote the notable *Bean Spasms* (1967). As a result, collaborative writing, which challenged and extended the concept of authorship, was popular in the late sixties and early seventies. Other significant books produced by this generation are Padgett's *Great Balls of Fire* (1969) and Alice Notley's *How Spring Comes* (1981). Anne Waldman, with her skills as a performer, organizer, and anthologist, provided much of the energy that made the St. Mark's scene a powerful literary force.

Projectivist or Black Mountain poetry evolved under the leadership of Charles Olson at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The leading alternative college of its time, Black Mountain was home to an extraordinary number of major figures, including painters Josef Albers and Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, and futurist thinker Buckminster Fuller, creator of the



geodesic dome. The poets Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, Hilda Morley, John Wieners, and Robert Duncan were in residence. Black Mountain poetics, which is more programmatic than that of the Beats or New York School, depends primarily on the essays and teachings of Charles Olson, especially "Projective Verse" (1950). In the essay, he calls for an "open" poetry, in which "FIELD COMPOSITION" replaces the "closed form" of the past. Field composition means that the poet "put himself in the open," improvising line by line, syllable by syllable, rather than using what Olson called "an inherited line" such as iambic pentameter.<sup>20</sup> He quotes the young Robert Creeley as saying that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT."<sup>21</sup> Form and content are therefore inextricably linked. Quoting his mentor Edward Dahlberg, Olson writes, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION."<sup>22</sup> To this he adds the injunction that "always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER."<sup>23</sup> This compositional pressure includes close attention to the syllable, which is "king."

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:  
the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE  
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE <sup>24</sup>

Attention to the line as a unit of breath is a major principle of Black Mountain composition, though as a technique it was flexible rather than prescribed. Each breath is a unit or measure of utterance; this is reflected in the length of the line, and, with Creeley's work especially, how the line is broken. Recordings of Olson and Creeley, whose speech patterns are quite different, reveal the importance of the line and breath to their spoken words. The line becomes an extension of the body itself. A similar emphasis is found in Ginsberg's statements that each strophe of Howl is ideally a unit of "Hebraic-Melvillean bardic breath."<sup>25</sup>

Another important aspect of Olson's essay is his concept of ego: "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego . . . that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature . . . and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects."<sup>26</sup> Olson's goal is to avoid the self-congratulatory elegiac mode, with its inevitable drift toward pathos. This is not to say that Projectivist poetry is impersonal. Olson's "The Librarian," among other poems, deals with his own life; the same is true of work by Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, and Hilda Morley.

Significant developments of the period 1950-1975 include Jerome Rothenberg's study of ethnopoetics, prophetic of multiculturalism; his early interest in performance poetry; and his invention of the term "deep image." The deep image, as seen in various phases of the work of Diane Wakoski, Robert Kelly, Clayton Eshleman, and Rothenberg himself, is inspired by the Andalusian *cante jondo*, or "deep song," surrealist-influenced Spanish poetry, including that of Federico Garcia Lorca, and Lorca's essay "Theory and Function of the *Duende*" (a Spanish word denoting ghosts and magic but in the poetic sense a deep knowledge, as of beauty and death). Strongly felt and resonant, the deep-image poem is as heroic in mood and stylized in execution as the flamenco. Rothenberg wrote in a letter to Robert Creeley:

So there are really two things here, conceivable as two realities: 1) the empirical world of the naive realists, etc. (what Buber and the hasidim call "shell" or "husk"), and 2) the hidden (floating) world, yet to be discovered or brought into being: the "kernel" or "sparks." The first world both hides and leads into the second, so as Buber says: "one cannot reach the kernel of the fruit except through the shell"; i.e., the phenomenal world is to be read by us; the perceived image is the key to the buried image: and the deep image is at once husk and kernel, perception and vision, and the poem is the movement between them.<sup>27</sup>

Fraught with the symbolist theory of correspondences--that nature may be read by means of its external appearances--the passage expresses the desire to see deeply and capture truth in a moment of mystical enlightenment. The Rothenberg passage above was written in 1960. As major influences on postmodern poetics, Wittgenstein and indeterminacy still wait in the wings.

Deep-image poems of any length tend to be organized as catalogues of self-sufficient images. Diane Wakoski's "Blue Monday," included in this volume, is an example of such a work. But practice of the deep image was so short-lived and unsystematic that it cannot be fully represented as a school. Moreover, many of the above poets were also associated with other aesthetics, especially Projectivism. Eshleman's work can be said to have descended through the deep image into the chthonic or underwordly.

Influenced by Zen Buddhism and Dada, the poetry of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low reflects an interest in the use of aleatory, or chance, procedures. Cage's *Themes & Variations* depends on a "library of mesostics on one hundred and ten different subjects and fifteen different names to make a chance-determined renga-like mix."<sup>28</sup> Cage used I Ching operations to focus his project, as well as to link a notebook of ideas (to be found in the Poetics section of this volume) with the names of friends. The purpose was "to find a way of writing which though coming from ideas is not about them; or is not about ideas but produces them."<sup>29</sup> By employing mesostics, a form of word puzzle in which emphasized letters spell out words vertically at the center of horizontal lines of poetry, Cage attempts to free the language from syntax. This "demilitarizes" it. "Nonsense and silence are produced, familiar to lovers. We actually begin to live together," he writes in the foreword to *M: Writings '67-'72*.<sup>30</sup> In the preface to his book *The Pronouns*, Jackson Mac Low explains that the series of poems involved a "set of 3-by-4- filing cards on which there are groups of words & of action phrases around which dancers build spontaneous improvisations."<sup>31</sup> Due to a "correspondence of format to syntax, each verse line, including its indented continuation, if any, is to be read as one breath unit."<sup>32</sup> Thus the series of poems not only stands as script for the dance, but also provides its own instructions for oral performance.

Aleatory poetry is not widely practiced by the generations of avant-gardists to follow Cage and Mac Low. Yet in its emphasis on the indeterminate and accidental, its reliance on rigid structures and methods to achieve randomization, its use of appropriation and found materials, and its willingness to lend itself equally to performance and to language poetry theory, it is the essence of postmodernism. Cage's work also bridges the earlier European avant-garde, especially Dada, and more recent American developments such as conceptual art.

By 1975 a new generation had begun to assert itself. Andrei Codrescu, Russell Edson, and Maxine Chernoff, among others, made use of Surrealist influences. It was also



a period in which the prose poem, founded by the French poet Aloysius Bertrand as early as 1842, came into prominence. The prose poets went in two directions: some, like Chernoff and Edson, wrote narratives, fables, and metafiction; others associated with the budding language poetry scene--Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, and Carla Harryman, for example--used the form to redefine the "unit" of attention from the line to the sentence, sentence fragment, and paragraph. Hejinian and Harryman, among others, used the prose poem to experiment with related prose forms such as autobiography, the essay, and fiction.

In the first postwar generation, only a few women, such as Denise Levertov, had risen to importance within the avant-garde. However, the 1970s saw the arrival of a number of significant women poets, from Anne Waldman and Alice Notley among the New York School to Susan Howe, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Rosmarie Waldrop, Rae Armantrout, Diane Ward, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, and Carla Harryman, among others, associated with language poetry. Implicit in the language poets' break with traditional modes such as narrative, with its emphasis on linearity and closure, is a challenge to the male-dominant hierarchy. In her essay "The Rejection of Closure," Lyn Hejinian quotes Elaine Marks regarding the desire of French feminist writers to "use language as a passageway, and the only one, to the unconscious, to that which had been repressed and which would, if allowed to rise, disrupt the established symbolic order, which Jacques Lacan has dubbed 'the Law of the Father.'"<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Hejinian sees the limit of complete openness: "The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would be in fact a closed text. It would be insufferable."<sup>34</sup> Jayne Cortez's "Inez Garcia, Joanne Litte--Two Rape Victims of the 1970s" and Wanda Coleman's "Brute Strength" refer to sexual conflict directly, using narrative elements to intensify the drama of the poem. Because they are more rhetorically forceful, the poems may seem more political than the work of women language poets. Yet the comparatively oblique work of Leslie Scalapino frequently alludes to the intrusive power of the male gaze over women as objects of desire.

In the last decade, two relatively marginal influences of the seventies, language poetry and performance poetry, have become increasingly the dominant postmodern modes. The first emphasizes textuality and therefore a degree of difficulty. Strongly based in theory, it requires an initiated reader. In its difficulty and literariness, language poetry is reminiscent of the High Modernism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Yet language poetry is Marxist and feminist in theory and disdains Pound and Eliot for their politically conservative themes. Performance poetry, especially as it has evolved into poetry "slams," has its chief appeal with the popular audience. Its interest is not in the "poem as poem," but rather in using the words as script for spoken word performance. In its verbal intensity, it recalls the Beat coffeehouse readings of the 1950s.

Language poetry finds its disparate precursors in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914); the writings of Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, inventor of *zaum*, or "transrational language"; Louis Zukofsky's *A* (1959/1978) and the Objectivist movement in general; John Ashbery's most radical book, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962); the early work of Clark Coolidge such as *Polaroid* (1975); and the chance procedures of Jackson Mac Low as seen in *The Pronouns* (1964/1979). Some aspects of Black Mountain poetics, especially Olson's statement against the individual ego, are also of interest to language poets, though they disassociate themselves from what Charles Bernstein calls

the "phallogocentric syntax" of Olson's poetry.<sup>35</sup> Seeing a poem as an intellectual and sonic construction rather than a necessary expression of the human soul, language poetry raises technique to a position of privilege. Language poets see lyricism in poetry not as a means of expressing emotion but rather in its original context as the musical use of words. Rather than employ language as a transparent window onto experience, the language poet pays attention to the material nature of words. Because it is fragmentary and discontinuous, language poetry may appear at first to be automatic writing; however, it is often heavily reworked to achieve the proper relation of materials. This approach is consistent with William Carlos Williams's definition of a poem as a "small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant."<sup>36</sup>

However, the principle of plenty often found in language poetry tends to frustrate the economy of phrase, and its suggestion of organic form, inherent in Williams's model. Ron Silliman's *Tjanting* (1981) consists of 213 pages of prose poetry, the last paragraph of which starts on page 128. It begins, "What makes this the last paragraph?" The sprawl of such work is designed to communicate the democratic principle of inclusiveness. Its form is located in what Silliman calls "The New Sentence," sentences being "the minimum complete utterance" according to linguist Simeon Potter.<sup>37</sup> Favoring the prose poem for its formal freedom and exhaustiveness, the language poet builds up a mosaic structure by means of seemingly unrelated sentences and sentence fragments. This progression of non sequiturs frustrates the reader's expectation for linear development at the same time that it opens a more complete world of reference. The emphasis in language poetry is placed on production rather than packaging (beginning, middle, end) and ease of consumption. Gertrude Stein gave the credit for this egalitarian theory of composition to her favorite painter: "Cezanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing is as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole."<sup>38</sup>

The author cedes his or her false authority as individual ego; broadly distributing wealth in the form of words, the author acquires a more trustworthy authority. Because the words are so freely given, they may seem scattered and disorganized. It is therefore necessary for the reader to participate actively in the creation of meaning. Charles Bernstein states in his essay "Writing and Method":

The text calls upon the reader to be actively involved in the process of constituting its meaning .... The text formally involves the process of response/ interpretation and in so doing makes the reader aware of herself or himself as producer as well as consumer of meaning.<sup>39</sup>

A poem is not "about" something, a paraphrasable narrative, symbolic nexus, or theme; rather, it is the actuality of words.

Language poetry's resistance to closure, which infuses meaning throughout the poem rather than overlaying it in lyrical and dramatic epiphanies, may prove to be one of its most lasting effects. It has also revealed the limits of a "natural" or "organic" concept of poetry. In language poetry, as in Marshall McLuhan's theory of television, the medium is the message. Words are not transparent vessels for containing and conveying higher truth; they are instead the material of which it is shaped. Gertrude Stein said that she was interested in two aspects of composition:



... the idea of portraiture and the idea of the recreation of the word. I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense.41

In much the same way an artist might view paint and stone, Stein conceived of words as the plastic material of her compositions in language. Each word has its own "weight and volume." It exists from an artistic viewpoint for its own "recreation." Such a view disinvests the language of metaphysics and returns it to the physical realm of daily use. Like Stein, language poets shatter the assumption that poetry is necessary and deep; it is, instead, arbitrary and contingent. Language poetry, too, rejects the idea of poetry as an oral form; it is written. To use French critic Roland Barthes's terminology, it is more "writerly" than "readerly." Indeed, language poetry could be seen as fulfilling Barthes's prophecy of a "neutral" mode of writing:

... writing thus passed through all the stages of progressive solidification; it was first the object of a gaze, then of creative action, finally of murder, and has reached in our time a last metamorphosis, absence: in those neutral modes of writing, called here "the zero degree of writing," we can easily discern a negative momentum ... as if Literature, having tended for a hundred years now to transmute its surface into a form with no antecedents, could no longer find purity anywhere but in the absence of all signs ... 42

Early workers in what is now called language poetry--Jackson Mac Low, Clark Coolidge, and Michael Palmer--remain among its leading practitioners. However, much of the critical theory and organizational energy have been the work of Charles Bernstein, whose books of essays *Content's Dream* (1986) and *A Poetics* (1992) most effectively express the group's thinking. Among other important points, Bernstein rejects reading as an "absorption" into the text, wherein the reader is imprisoned by the author's mimetic devices. Like many other postmodern theorists, he also opposes the heroic stance, which "translates into a will to dominate language rather than let it be heard."43

Also of note are Barrett Watten's essays, collected in *Total Syntax* (1985); *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, edited by Michael Palmer (1983); Ron Silliman's *The New Sentence* (1987); and *Writing/Talks* (1985), edited by Bob Perelman, a collection of talks given at New Langton Arts in the late seventies and early eighties.

The work of Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka has always lent itself to performance. But in the early 1970s, with David Antin's creation of the "talk poem," Rothenberg's performances of Native American chants, John Giorno's early electronic choruses, and the growing importance of performance as an area of conceptual art, performance poetry entered a new phase. It was no longer based on reading to an audience from a printed text, but rather in extending the prepared text, if one existed, through theater and ritual. This returned poetry to its communal roots (if gallerygoers can be said to constitute a community) and gave words a hopeful uncertainty as well as oracular sweep and confidence. Performance poetry implicitly challenged the preciousness of the page and the concept of a poem as a closed system. Always provisional, living and dying dramatically in the air, the spoken word is also unconditionally public, and therefore frequently political or persuasive in character.

If language poetry seeks to invent a future through the written text, performance poetry bears nostalgia for a more perfect past when orality was primary. David Antin says in his talk poem *what am i doing here?* (1973):

the past had a lot more  
talking than it had writing      i'll make a bold hypothesis before  
there was talking      before there was writing      before there was  
talking there wasn't talking      before there was writing there was  
talking      this may not be an immense hypothesis      but its  
certainly true      and      it has its consequences      there are  
certainly consequences i can draw from this      that before there  
was writing down      and looking up      there was remembering<sup>43</sup>

In his talk poems, which appear in print as transcripts of unrehearsed talk before an audience, Antin goes into the instant of speech, when the "writing" of the thought and its utterance are nearly instantaneous. The haltingness and repetitiveness of the above fragment are part of the project's allure, as is the risk that his utterance will be ill-conceived or intellectually thin. Present at the very moment of creation, the audience observes the fragility of invention in every pause and stammer.

The early performance poems of John Giorno, one of the form's pioneers, used multiple voices and repetitions, sometimes by adding additional tape tracks to the spoken word in performance. This echo converted each line of the text to its own refrain and gave a ritualized, almost choral, character to the work. Giorno often shouts his lines in an insistent cadence, which gives a disembodied universality to his assertions. The poems are not improvised, but written in advance and rehearsed. In recent years, Giorno has memorized his work, which gives it an even more oracular quality.

Other leading performance poets include Jayne Cortez, who sing-shouts her work in a piercing voice; Anne Waldman, who follows Rothenberg and Ginsberg in her use of the chant; Kenward Elmslie, whose work is dense with wordplay and often sung in a handsome baritone voice; Ed Sanders, who makes use of homemade electronic devices, including a musical tie; Miguel Algarm, founder of the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, a center for performance poetry; Jimmy Santiago Baca and Victor Hernandez Cruz, winners of the Taos Poetry Circus competition; and the fiery Wanda Coleman, one of the best political poets now writing.

The multiculturalism of performance poetry is no accident. According to Gary Snyder, "Of all the streams of civilized tradition with roots in the paleolithic, poetry is one of the few that can realistically claim an unchanged function and a relevance which will outlast most of the activities that surround us today."<sup>44</sup> The activities that the multicultural poets resist are cultural genocide, the political and economic fallout from imperialism, and the homogenizing forces of modern technology. Orality, the primary means of communication among pre-industrial societies, enables the artist to achieve a ritual connection with his or her community, disparate as it may be. The effect of performance poetry has been to devalue the "poem as poem," a self-contained object, and to reinstitute its instrumental function as communication. The dilemma of performance poetry lies in a paradox of commodity. While performance art began as a way to commodify the art object, its inherent theatricality quickly reinvests it with commodity value.



In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Marjorie Perloff traces the avant-garde from its infancy in symbolist poetry, especially that of Rimbaud: "it is Rimbaud who strikes the first note of that 'undecidability' we find in Gertrude Stein, in Pound, and Williams . . . an undecidability that has become marked in the poetry of the last decades."<sup>45</sup> This inheritance includes futurism, Dada, surrealism, modernism, and the varieties of postmodernism we are now experiencing. The *fin de siècle* position of postmodern art suggests to some that it is in a state of exhaustion; in *Has Modernism Failed?*, art critic Suzi Gablik argues unpersuasively that "innovation no longer seems possible, or even desirable."<sup>46</sup> In fact, the poetry now being produced is as strong as, and arguably stronger than, that produced by earlier vanguards. As history remains dynamic, so does the artistic concept of "the new." The period since 1950 will be seen as the time when the United States finally acquired its full share of cultural anxiety and world knowledge, and thereby its most daring poetry.

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