

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

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The Politics of the Referent

The following four articles are part of a symposium edited by Steve McCaffery on "The Politics of the Referent." The essays, which date from 1976, were originally published in the Canadian journal, Open Letter (edited by Frank Davey) in the summer of 1977 (Third Series, No.7).

It seems worth remembering, in looking back on these essays, that the tendencies in writing McCaffery is talking about under such headings as 'language-centered' are as open to the entrapments of stylistic fixation as any other tendency in recent poetry. The reason we have have shied away from any such labels in editing L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is that our project, if it can be summarized at all, has had to do with exploring the numerous ways meanings can be (& are) realized—revealed—produced in writing. In this context, the idea that writing could be stripped of reference is as troubling and confusing a view as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constituted world of 'things'. Rather, reference, like the body itself, is a given dimension of language, the value of which is to be found, in its various extents, in the poem (the world) before which we find ourselves at any moment. It is the power of reference (denotative, connotative, associational), not writers' refusal or fear of it, that threads these essays together. It is a renewed power that comes from the recognition that the (various) measuring and composition of our references is the practice of our craft.

STEVE MCCAFFERY

The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing

As we understand increasingly the unity of the human symbolic field and how man is primarily a semiotic animal inhabiting and creating a context that is itself semiotic and governed by common operations, as we understand this so we will understand how the whole notion of a literature discriminated from language is irrelevant.

There is a group of writers today united in the feeling that literature has entered *a crisis of the sign*; that the explications of literatures have merged with the implications of language and that the foremost task at hand — a more linguistic and philosophic than 'poetic' task — is to demystify the referential fallacy of language.

REFERENCE I take it, is that kind of blindness a window makes of the pane it is; that motoric thrust of the word which takes you out of language into a tenuous world of the other and so prevents you seeing what it is you see.

Clark Coolidge, Bruce Andrews, Ray Di Palma, Charles Bernstein, Robert Grenier, Barbara Baracks, David Melnick, Ron Silliman. What you will find uppermost in their writing is this conviction: that language is above all else a system of signs and that writing must stress its semiotic nature through modes of investigation and probe, rather than mimetic, instrumental indications. Theirs, is not a movement as such but a quiet assertion of an interconnectedness of concerns: to centre language inside itself; to show the essential subjectless-ness a text might be; to stress the disemotional and dereferential possibilities of language as fragmentary, yet intensely direct experience. Language then, for itself, but for the sake of us. To step outside of use. To counter-communicate in order ... to see what a hammer is when not in function.

Context is not important but historic frame articulation must include: the Russian Formalists (long neglected but appearing as influence for almost the first time in North American writing in the work of Silliman and Melnick); Roland Barthes (writing degree zero, semiocriticism); the works of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida (the sign as diacritical ... reference ... difference ... the metaphysics of absence). Earlier connections can be seen with the semiological writings of C.S. Peirce and the pioneer work of Ferdinand de Saussure (the bipolarity of the sign, the essential oppositional nature of linguistic units). A parallel, too, might be drawn with the semiotic concerns of concrete poetry — not so much around the investigative extrapolation

of the visual properties of the word, but rather around the mutual stress upon language as a direct event, a 'seen' thing (in concretism) and hence a 'felt' thing (in language-centred writing).

The hardest thing in reading is just to see the seeing that you're seeing. To let the word receive your sight. To not deflect off language but re-flect within it. To let your seeing be what your reading was. To let the direct, empirical experience of a grapheme replace what the signifier in a word will always try to discharge: its signified and referent.

Little commentary has, so far, been forthcoming on this type of counter-communication. Silliman's *Surprised by Sign*, which annotates a collection of this work in *Alcheringa* (New Series, v. 1, No. 2, 1975) is, possibly, the best of current access to this writing variously termed 'formalist', 'structuralist', 'dereferentialist', 'minimalist', 'language centred' and which I will refer to as 'counter-communicative' and 'cipheral'.

Proposition: to treat this work from a presupposed position of 'unreadability', 'disinterestedness' and 'inaccessibility', from such consumptive stances as refuse to see text as an agent of production.

Language-centered writing involves a major alteration in textual roles: of the socially defined functions of writer and reader as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis. The main thrust of this work is hence political, rather than aesthetic, towards a frontal assault on the steady categories of authorship and readership. What it offers is the alternative sense of reader and writer as equal and simultaneous participants within a language product. At its core, linguistic reference is a displacement of human relationships and as such is fetishistic in the Marxian sense. Reference, like commodity, has no connection with the physical property and material relations of the word as a grapheme.

stint grits

darts

file

gratis

ways to fit tins

dapper

angle

ill

apple

sax

wash

max

a phone

port planter

graph ending the end

only back

a bit from

passing after

wrecked

guff
water
waterized
needle

(Barbara Baracks)

The initial problem in readership here is to abandon all prejudicial perceptual sets and to consciously assist oneself in producing one's own reading among the polysemous routes that the text offers. With the removal of grammatical conditioners as dictates of a single reading, language enters the domain of its own inwardness; the conventional centrifugality of signification is reversed and the Sign turns inward through the absence of grammar to a pure, lexemic presence.

Seen as such, then, the text is a critique of language achieved by way of a deconstruction of grammatical context. Words are placed next to words but what the juxtaposition is deprived of is a true sense of words in community. We are among isolated meanings, absolute potencies and graphic events.

I would here deny the need to stress all this as somehow a part of literature. More significant and to the point is to acknowledge a number of texts that constitute, collectively and cumulatively, a novel interrogative stance of language against itself.

Language centred writing shows a concern with the order of effects that connect with the signifier rather than the referent. Together with this is a specific minimization of the effect of the signified (if we consider the latter to be a kind of 'discharge' from the signifier.) Language centering avoids the discharge and hence short-circuits the semiotic loop. It is this superfluity of the signifier that promotes in these texts the quality I term 'cipher'.

al (t ch
ph ysto kl
ee
apl
sta
)
ry (mccaffery)

Cipherality belongs to a synchronic poetics; it is tenseless and free from both reference and alterity, thereby centered within its textual self and available as a primary empirical experience. The cipheral text involves a replacement in readerly function from a reading of words to an experiencing of graphemes, for conventional reading involves the use of referential vectors and it is such vectors that are here removed. Language is material and primary and what's experienced is the ten-

sion and relationship of letters and letteristic clusters, simultaneously struggling towards, yet refusing to become, significations.

The cipher or emptied sign is a frozen dialectic within a semiotic process, less an active sign than a sign removed from function (and hence deconstructed) to be observed and experienced as event per se.

Ciphericity is a zero-methodology by which texts are constructed which are designed to say nothing. To be silent, however, is to withhold the possibility to speak. The cipheral, or language-centred text is, on the graphemic level of the sign, what tautology is in the formal rules and structures of logic. '... not a field in which we express what we wish with the help of signs, but rather one in which the nature of the absolutely necessary signs speaks for itself.' (Wittgenstein)

... The publicly silent sign, then, as the self-speaking sign. ... and cipher ... the tautology of the signifier.

mob cuspid
welch
 eyelet
go lavender
futuribles (andrews)

presents a semiotic ambivalence to the reading experience: do you decipher or do you augment and complete? Both approaches are admissible, for it's precisely the nature of texts like andrews' to present themselves as ambiguities, approachable either as densities, as compressions requiring a reading that approximates a hermeneusis; or else as lacunaire, deliberate incompletions requesting a reading that extends them towards completion.

In the first approach (i.e. treating the poem as a structural density) the reading experience can be likened to a vertical axis descending downwards into a text whose surface signifies an implicit depth. In this manner the structure of the sign is destroyed within the poem yet, at the same time, is transferred into the reading experience itself where text equals signifier and the reading descent equals the signified. Sign, in this way, expands to include readership into its very structure. In the second method of reading, we adopt a sense of meaning based upon the cipher — the emptied sign. In this method, meaning is not hidden beneath a surface but is emptied out of a container; the tendency to vertical descent through a text's illusionary surface, becomes resolved within an experiencing of absences as gaps upon a textual surface. In this way syntax homologizes what in the world of sculpture is negative space. Absence is experienced as an event either anterior or exterior to any semantic presence.

albe
 skep
 tref
 jush
 numb
 pffe neig (Andrews)

By eliminating reference this way, by reducing the connotative range of the graphemes, Andrews promotes a strong object quality in this text. Lettristic clusters of this kind tend to function in the manner of a punctuation, as pure space-time arrestments. To experience a text as such 'events' affirms encipherment, for a non-referential event is the prime quality of the emptied sign.

An alternative reading might tend to promote decipherment: the sign grasped as a 'fragmentary' base on which to develop a lexical reconstitution. Reading, in this manner, takes the form of a re-composition with the centrifugal pressure that all referential texts possess being modified as an urge back to the word. Reading here, then, as a reparation of the word. The writer as logoclast. The reader as logotect and logotherapist.

The implication behind a decipheral style of reading is that the given text is partial, incomplete or imperfect, suggesting in these terms not necessarily an aesthetic deficiency but rather a radically political invitation to the reader to cast off his former pre-ordained role as the recipient of a message and to enter the domain of the writer.

Two procedural readings of language-centered writing have been proposed: encipherment and decipherment. Encipherment I've tried to indicate above is based upon a sense of the text as complete, eventist, surface and immediate; decipherment upon a sense of the text as potential but partial, and holding the capability to expand towards a destination within semantic normality.

Quite clearly from this, a decipheral reading homologizes the referential thrust of the conventional verbal sign for both reference and verbal re-composition involve the use of vectors that lead to a destination outside of the graphic, phenomenal immediacy of the physical text presented.

time ceal hum base
 treat south admit
 law the dissolve add

owl (Coolidge)

Coolidge. Andrews. Silliman. Di Palma. In their work we approach —

anterior to an actual reading — a page which holds coherently an iconicity which the very act of reading removes. In reading such poems we thrust the text back into the domain of a writing. As in the above example a statement is made in visual terms around the notion of cluster and detachment. To penetrate beyond the very seeing of this statement, in effect, destroys that very element of the poem; it suggests, in fact, that it is the experience of reading itself that promotes the counter-communication. What language-centered writing serves to emphasize is the semiocritical relationship of consecutive to simultaneous sign, the striated nature of a reading and a seeing, and the relationship of a spatial to a linear syntax.

Hence there's a translative act involved in the reading, from a spatial to a linear setting, from an instantaneous seeing of a group of lexical extensions (and in other cases lexical fragmentations) to a consecutive reading of that seeing. 'Reading' it might be said, is the receptor term in a translative process whose source term is 'seeing', whilst what the poem itself constitutes is a metaperceptual system that offers to the reader an initial seeing, passing on into a secondary seeing (as a reading) of that primary seeing.

sadd bier
 metapoif
 lid cift ure,

hid tyer (David Melnick from: PCOET)

analog: phoneme is to tone what
 word is to melody:
 themselves.

the text like music: for both involve a semiotics minus a compound semantic level (i.e. the referential, contentual plane.)

In Melnick's work we find the most extreme, uncompromising excommunication of reference. Poem as object-process not commodity and an atonality for the ear through fragmentation — here above, with the word as tone; the phoneme and phoneme clusters atonalities.

Applying the notion of cipher to the unread text, text becomes the perceived iconicity that exists anterior to a reading. Text as icon is the empty sign awaiting the experience of a filling. The act of decipherment is that particular kind of readerly engagement which activates the kinetic properties of the text: (syntax as processual movement, sequentiality, reference as a psycholinguistic refraction without alter-

nity however, association, connotation as the dynamic expansion of a meaning important for its *felt* expansiveness. And what such decipherment constitutes is not so much a reading as an alternative or additional writing of the text. We may say that the realization of a decipherment indicates a specific movement of the text, a turning back of itself upon itself to formulate a centering, proposing a new reading as a new writing.

I take it that reference, the mystifying carrot dangled before the eyes of the reader, is the sole preventative to such a co-participation. the structural support of both literacy and capitalist economy is reference. The cipher acts as a critique of language by way of a de-construction, demystification and expressed truncation of the verbal Sign's serial reference; moving language into the domain of its autonomous parts seized as entities and expressed directly as the isolated actions of a surface.

Language-centered counter-communication concentrates upon factors of formation inside of language and not on the centrifugal functioning of words; it is hence counter narrational and counter-commodital at the same time. Seen through a Marxian perceptual set, the cipher is a strategic method of creating non-commodital process-products, a method of ontological deconstruction that casts reader and writer both into the one, same labour process. We might speak of this kind of writing as a bracketed poetics, deliberate in its suspension of all linguistic procedure, in order to allow an attention to be focussed on a phonological form.

In a capitalistic, referentialist context, criticism is that which validates a text; it is an exterior energy brought to focus on a divided form and designed to alter perception of that form. Criticism of this kind is a divided labour from the text. In language-centered writing, where ciphericity is dominant, criticism fuses with creativity and becomes an internal quality of the text itself. Internal criticism of this kind takes the form of a foregrounding of the problematics of the verbal sign as the sign itself displays this in its own truncation.

By eliminating grammatical armament from language, by a freeing of the parts to be themselves and by inviting the reader into this immanence of text, the full, polysemous possibilities of language are opened up. Reference is no longer the promise at the end of the grammatical road, no longer the opiate of the reader. Rather the text becomes the communal space of a labour, initiated by the writer and extended by the second writer (the reader). So we break, finally, the divisive structure of the conventional reading process. The old duality of reader — writer collapses into the one compound function, and the two actions are permitted to become a simultaneous experience within the activity of the engager.

Language-centering: the ontologic core: that there is no anterior identity; that authorship becomes the internal quality of text. Counter-communication of this kind might also mark a significant extension of Olsonian field theory in projective verse from the sense of the poem as occupying a mediate position as energy field, supplied by the writer and drawn from by the reader, to the concept of the poem as a rotating energy source, a translative construct in which the written text is subject to re-writing in reading, thereby refracting the energy present. What is proposed then, is a specific application of reading to function as a writing that transforms the text.

- i) remove the arrow of reference. no alternity. no direction outward.
- ii) replace it with word, letter, phoneme or grapheme i.e. with the point of place and event.

Is the Cipher similar to Wittgenstein's 'formal concept'? Quote: Formal concepts cannot, in fact, be represented by means of a function, as concepts proper can.

For their characteristics, formal properties are not expressed by means of functions. Unquote (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 4.126). And earlier: 'When something falls under a formal concept as one of its objects, this cannot be expressed by means of a proposition. Instead it is shown in the very sign for this object.'

Is a word a place that meaning can exist in?

... Language: i.e. overall proficiency with localized ignorance. Reference: the continentalist drive in language.

'Names are like points; propositions like arrows.' (Wittgenstein). So the cipheral text must be nominal at base.

Clearly then, language-centered writing involves the most determinate poetics yet proposed in the history of writing. Determinate because it avoids the central contradiction of the Linguistic Sign — the use of an absence to re-present a present. Reference is that absence, leading out from a present sign to an extrasemiotic state: the imposed self-destruction of language in the world 'of real things'.

The Cipher, and language-centered counter-communication in general provides a text in which the sign names itself a present naming with signs *standing* period; not signs standing for an absence.

CODICIL

collides triangle lucid nap
broad wet exertion

sift plunges
 halo shallows
lean-to precocious
 trickle blade
railing fluency plankton abrupt
 sea's rib
 glows lobes (Ray Di Palma)

Conventional reading patterns promote the sense of a linguistic mask: a desire to get beyond the words themselves or alternatively 'beneath' them into a region of reference: of images, symbols and ideas that the surface syntagms seem somehow to withhold from us. Conventional reading hence resists the sheer fact of a text's graphic immanence. Surface. Words, traditionally, are seen to simultaneously reveal and obscure intents and meanings, with the Sign's own mask taking the form of the signifier that transports – yet at the same time delays – the destination in the signified. Di Palma's piece demonstrates the kinetics of mask (as we 'read', 'see' or scan it there are certain lexic movements, associations etc.; there are adjacencies, contiguities but no pre-ordained connections, yet it is a mask without depth. As readers we come to feel the movement *per se* as a movement without destination upon a surface of text. It mobilizes an object quality, property of immanence, replacing depth by the parallel, sympathetic sense of surface complexity by which mask becomes moebius and depth a surface fold.

This emphasis upon surface movement suggests a topological analogy that helps get us further into the essential movement and structure of these texts. 'Topology represents the primary intellectual operation capable of revealing the modalities of surfaces, volumes, boundaries, contiguities, holes, and above all the notions of *inside* and *outside*, with the attendant ideas of insertion, penetration, containment, emergence and the like.'¹ An interesting analogy presents itself in the instance of the Klein Worm – a form which differs from conventional geometric forms in its characteristic absence of both inner and outer surfaces.²

'Instead you have a contained tube and an uncontained tube, a contained hole and an uncontained hole ... Any part of the form can touch, contact, communicate with, flow with any other part ... We have a quality of continuousness in the form and at the same time intracontainment ... (This form) is permeated by context. It has no walls. Yet it uses its structural infolding for maintaining itself changing in a sufficiently regular way to find new relations.'³

wlkt sTdh

(FPRTO

T

E

(fF)

Tts

xcphj t t

cb (mccaffery)

The above is a Klein Form. The text is 'without walls', it is open field or 'constellational' with the principle of syntax replaced by that of milieu. A reading activates certain relational pathways, a flow of parts, and — denied the exteriorizing force of reference — a structural 'infolding' of the textual elements. Sign itself is a topological aspect of text with the referent and signified 'outside' the text, and the signifier 'inside'. The excommunication of the referent and the established surplus of signifiers can be seen as a complication both of surface and of the nature of interiorities. For the signifier, when devoid of its signified (i.e. cipher), is like an interiority without the drive to externalization.

Fragmentation: i.e. as that which creates the notion of textual equality. 'Phonemes of the Word fragment! You have nothing to lose but your referents!'. Non-grammatical emphasis is equal emphasis. Non-subordination. Non-hierarchy. Hence multi-directional.

In fragmentation there is no external support lent to a signifier from the signified for that very relation is severed in the act of fragmentation. Result: a surplus state of signifiers. Ciphers. Non-grammatical surface interplays of signifying elements:

ice ism out play han
 elph eps oop ng
ap ure er ut ed
sense raturum camel mand (Amirkhanian)

Such a poem is neither a verbal stimulant nor a verbal tranquillizer, but rather a paraverbal surface onto which a reader is invited to step into productive effort. What it is not is textual commodity, replete with reference to be consumed by 'an understanding' reader. The demand is for *praxis* not consumption.

By investing *total* energy into counter-communication, language-centered texts become surface pressures *that functionally dislocate the reader*. Syntax. More milieu than syntax with the letter very often the basic unit of organization. Andrews speaks of 'each word being a syntax'. The letter in space with self-generating aura. Letter clusters and the occasional word where meaning is held to reverberate not connect into larger compounds:

mel

ethwe fub sditas (Melnick)

That is, the elevation of letter to morphologic status.

I believe it to be in the work of Melnick, Silliman, Coolidge, Di Palma and Andrews that a new concept of the meaningful is emerging, a concept based not upon communication but upon a creative entry into the opacity of evacuated signs. It is perhaps less a new concept of meaning than a new attitude to the place of meaning within and without a language set. For what it suggests is this: that meaning is dependent on the context of attention that a reader brings to his text; i.e. meaning is the sum total value that a reader puts into a piece. Meaning: what the reader brings as *praxis*, not what the reader takes away as reference. So we can see how language-centered writing enforces a charity, a total givingness of reader and writer to their texts. Texts so long have been those things which a reader has raped, drawn out of, now is the moment of the text's receiving into itself. And the reader? An extension of vocabulary, both operator and component of a textual event.

Cipher is the baptism of the residual. The sign on holiday.

Script and Language. A poem enters the domain of script when the letter assumes the role of formal unit and stereographic relation becomes its major quality. Relations graphed across a surface that affirm their own immanence, their own autonomous dynamic. The *scriptive* would be in contrast to the *linguistic* poem whose basic unit is the word and whose radical property is signification.

In his book *Space*, Coolidge moves from language into script (as does Melnick in *PCOET*), into the manufacture of graphic events ('graphemes') within a stereographic space:

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cal
nize

Note, however, that Coolidge plays upon familiar reading patterns, adopting truncations that suggest complete vocabularies. As a result there's a bifurcation in the reading experience between the feeling of instant graphic events seen before you as complete discontinuities; and the felt possibility of developing continuities the more the reader approaches the text from familiar paradigms:

everything
mineral
instantly
defined
towards
optical
canonize

suggests the type of 'completion' and textual writing possible. Note too how both the spatial placement of the graphemes and the sheer fact of their density command equal attention. It's the finely executed balance of these two qualities of space and density that inform the best language centered pieces. Compositionally it's the engineering of these two drives towards a form understood as both potential sign and matter that is central. Syntax is transformed to become a calculus of densities and a geomantic ordering of pure experiences ('events' as events are 'signs without histories').

The balancing of space and density results in the concretization of the cipher, the emptying of the sign of its function and the presentation of the signifier as truncated materiality. It is hence oppositional to any abstract poetics and stands comparison to concrete poetry in the manner in which both isolate verbal elements in order to demonstrate their own structures and ontologies without the obstacle of referring to a thing outside their present being and shape.

woe	eroa	
asrglry	s	
wea tiro	bohmuluk	
codfix	a,azz	oboi (Melnick)

Linguistic endgame? Or scriptive project? A poem that anchors its elements as a field of prelinguistic chromosomes that embody the energies which may develop into word or into event, is an accoustic, a cipheral happening. Appreciation of potential *per se*, of that quality in signs that Wittgenstein insists we recognize at the beginning of *The Tractatus*: that every actual instance embodies all the possibilities it could have been. The paradigm is always on the back of the syntagm. And more recently Sartre in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* that 'every word ... contains the whole of language and reaffirms it.'

Possibility is an immanence.

... and asking the reader grasp a poem's ontology within the sum total of its unrealized potential, with that potential considered as the coiled but ready reflex of the sign anterior to its thrust outward into reference.

To suggest then that meaning be considered (if at all) as a doubleness around the core of the cipher: meaning as encipherment, a consolidation of the status of the vacated word; and meaning as decipherment or thrust towards completion of a partial sign. Meaning here, is not the product nor the attendant of a referring, not a destination outside of the living event of the words and graphic shapes; it is rather the occasioning of a focus upon text, that environment which encompasses such readings and makes them possible. In other words, language centered texts respond better to a sense of meaning as an imported context into decontextualised language zones.

Decontextualization, the salient feature of language centered writing, serves to return language elements to their primary meanings. Within the parameters of readership what is opposed is a simple to a complex readability. Readability becomes complicated when language is made conscious of itself and of its source exterior to the sequential progress of the line. Andrews is especially successful at such complications, there is a striking non-gravitational effect within many of his pieces that rises from the multiple interlocking of parts and the replacement of linear direction by a vertical and horizontal balancing which creates a tracery in spatial neutrality and highlights the coronal nature of the graphemes:

ca ja a th an ne sh th wa pe
qu ci fo in ba wh vi re se th
eu co st cu wo al su cr ce re
in ma vi si ba am ch qu an is
th th cu ni se fa wo ap se th
pr st th st th th ac wh wh pa

wi ha wa ti bo pr wo fe th tr
fa sp if so th th pl fo to tw

The weight of the iconicity plus the weight of the possibilities to index. Andrews here takes the word beyond its lexical base (that base in definition where each word operates independently from out of its dictionary force of isolation) to the preverbal region of the operating letter.

Time and Tense.

To remove reference in the way that language centered writing does, is to radically alter the category of linguistic time. Most critically it removes tense as a temporal issue within a text through a centering of time utterly within the assertion (the happening) of each lexeme. CIPHERAL time is the time of each word 'happening,' accumulating into the total time of the text's happening itself, as text here is the duration of the reading.

pulling banter flank blonde
folded captain girlfriend himself
drive leg chemist's punching
fire milling cuffs naw
captain madman ways roast
bags excitedly ass bad (Andrews: 'The Red Hallelujah')

The self-standing word is the word which is free from imposed context. It resides within its lexical basis, within its total content. 'Blonde' holds a totality of content and a range of possible application that an additional (contextualizing) phrase — the blonde hairdresser — serves to restrict and which, 'The young, blonde, hairdresser in Schumaker's variety store' restricts even further. This is not to suggest by the term 'total content' the word as a generalization, or as somehow nonspecific, but rather to emphasize the tractable *weight* of the single word when freed from specific use; the open-endedness of its indexicality; its processual, non-commodity nature; the single word as the in-gathered point of infinite application. It is the ability to contain this kind of paradigmatic structure within the syntagmatic instance that is responsible for the tremendous density in this kind of writing. In a grammatical line of discourse, a word must assume a chosen context, and enter into a divisive labour. Freed, however, from the enforced communality that is grammar, the word approaches its own totalization and we are forced to encounter the word frontally as an absolute property.

As to *page* in language-centred discourse?

Page, as before, remains an *interpretive space*. The page is no less than *the sign for attention itself*. A geographical cipher. The non-referring gesture of the language-centered writer is hence to fill an empty sign (the page) with further ciphers. Text and page relate as a cipheral palimpsest or even cipheral pun. Cipher on top of cipher — the sexuality of the emptied sign and the maximization of all possibilities of what the signs can index.

We descend into their emptiness to experience how full they can be.
Orpheus.

eras
tory
ien
bined
swer
ft
priv
lat a ge
hyst
trem
i h (from Picc., bruce andrews)

When a text is perceived, it is that thing. Is there a difference between reading and seeing this piece? What precisely is the psycholinguistic experience of a translation from the seen into the read and from the read into the seen?

Language-centered writing displays language in opacity gained by this subtle balancing of the literate and the perceptible. To see language is to experience its opacity; to read signs is to pursue their operations of spatial discharge. The above text is fragment only if the mind cares to retreat back into its familiar lexical associations and refuse to take a stand upon the dialectical pinion of the seen and the read. This poem is a poem of absolute denotation, a total condition of self-reflexive sign structured by aura rather than syntax and stressing the sign's own excess of presence precisely because there is no operating reference. It is a patterned cipher whose gravity obtains from a surplus of signification. It is over-determined and hence a presentness. It cannot be located in any category and thus is not context bound. A signifier without a signified and whose destination is inward to the center of its own form.

In other words the condensation of the sign: the centripetal movement of the cipher into the core of its very being and executed prior to its being called upon as traditional vehicle programmed to an outside destination. Condensation brings the experience of such texts to the

surface of the page where script meets the threshold of a reading at the point of 'seeing signs.'

The cipher. The art of the deficient message that's characterized by shifts in linguistic form from grammar to lexis, from closed, contextual form to open de-contextual set. Foucault, writing of the modern condition of language, states it has become a thing of space: 'a universal space of inscription.' Once the fallacy of the referent is revealed for what it is then we are able to see language as that highly complex play of signifiers detached from stable signifieds; a language no longer representing a world outside of itself, but a language obeying its own constitution and dynamic. I take cipher to be this: the natural extension of language in our time and in the pressures, relations and contradictions of this age, beyond the referentially anchored sign into a metaphysics of presence unparalleled in past writing. Shapes made to stay and we to experience that abidance. It is the particular gift of such writers as Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Clark Coolidge and Ray DiPalma to have provided the first instantiated phase of post-literate writing; the first to understand (and to thrust out a solid poetics from that understanding) of the structural divisiveness of literacy: the metaphysics of its absence in the thrust of reference out of the ignored presence of script; and its tragic separation of reader from writer by the horizontal line of 'communication' and the vertical axis of the poem as commodity.

Happy trails to that interface.

NOTES

- 1 Bruce Morrisette, 'Topology and the French Nouveau Roman' in *Boundary 2*, 1.1, Fall, 1972 p.47.
- 2 On the Klein Worm see Warren Brody, 'Biotopology' in *Radical Software*, No.4, Summer 1971.
- 3 *ibid.* (quoted in Morrisette, p.52.
- 4 *loc. cit.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

There is no central source of this work. I would suggest, however, as primary material in language-centered writing the issue of *Alcheringa* containing the fine mini-anthology of language centered writing: 'The Dwelling Place 9 Poets' i.e. *Alcheringa*, New Series 1.2, 1975. As well as the representative selection here, a reader will also receive the added treat of Ron Silliman's fine essay: *Suprised By Sign*.

Toothpick, Lisbon & The Orcas Islands The Andrews/Wiater Issue, Fall 1973 is essential material. Containing works by Andrews, Sondheim, Silliman, Eigner, DiPalma et al.

A recent anthology: *None of The Above*, ed. Michael Lally, includes language centered pieces in its representation of American Poetry 1945-1975. Crossing Press 1976.

Not mentioned in this essay is the work of Jackson MacLow, the pilgrim father of aleatoric poetry whose texts — chance generated — are suitably a propos of ciphercity. MacLow adopts chance procedures to free language from grammatical perspective and sequential reference. Therefore, I would suggest a careful reading of *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, Something Else Press, New York, 1971 and *22 Light Poems*, Los Angeles, Black Sparrow Press 1968. Ron Silliman is the tireless editor of *Totipot*, in many ways the lifeline of language centered writing. Issue 14 is a special Bruce Andrews Issue.

Additional reading and research is bringing more writers of nonreferential relevance to the fore. Of particular note at this point are Thomas A. Clark, Neil Mills and Charles Verey (all from the U.K.); Canadian Dave MacFadden's *Ova Yogas* seems stunningly applicable (and alas for the miss in this essay) and buddah b.p.nichol, minister of syntax, high chief of frame concept and co-participant in the Toronto Research Group is touching on these areas in his epic (and as yet unpublished) *Translating Translating Appolinaire and Negatives*.

All leads here are to excite a reader to delve into that fascinating and ultimately intractable world of the little magazine.

BRUCE ANDREWS
Text and Context

Language is the center, the primary material, the sacred corpus, the primum mobile, the erotic sense of its own shared reality. Not a separate but a distinguishing reality. Yet where is the energy invested?

There is nothing to decipher.
There is nothing to explain.

☞ To engage in the collective task of creating a literature no longer finds support on the scaffolding of discourse. In dismantling the scaffolding, we create a literature — a record of negative retrieval. 'Unreadability' — that which requires new readers, and teaches new readings.

☞ Anything that is not a hypnosis is partial. No text, in that sense, is 'wholesome' — only experiences. Something is lost but something is gained. Not exactly 'differentialist' — for can writing be adequately tagged with what it's not doing? Isn't that the old chest-busting negativism of the avant-garde? Qualities are to be *aufgehoben*, not stricken. The sign's structure is *for* us by being before us; it does not dissolve into an outward looking system of radar, or of reading as radar. Reference isn't banished, except in the extremes of lettrism — and here it even stays on as a reminder. Remember? Not 'formalist' — for does this display an obsession with form as apart from the full potential of language? All form is an expression and an inscription: how personal can you get? how personal can you be? Form as physical, as material, as unlike the idea of elsewhere. 'Here' is more corporeal, somehow, than 'there'. Look over there = Avert your eyes. The here and now.

Thus, how do we read what is meant *precisely to* be read? that is given us for no other purpose, and without distraction (even those distractions which we often take as the stigmata of 'reading' but are really those of entertainment, those of good fog). *Wordsome*.

☞ As though the referential fallacy and the pathetic fallacy were but special cases of each other. Desperate barriers against regret? Pragmatic illusions. As though the world, or even the text, were a simply structural density that could nourish us, alone. How communal can you get? Show us a way out. The way out is not through the basement door, getting lost among prerequisite cultural

mementos, in deceptive (or descriptive) depth.

☛ Pointing, or referential signification first signifies depth, or reinforces the security found in possible depth – the pot at the end of the rainbow, the commodity or ideology that brings fulfillment; choicelessness; a lower layer that is nature-like in its immobility or fixity or self-evidence. 'The fix is on.' It hypnotizes us with these expectations, long before any particular content is unearthed. The format massages us with its illusions – false bottoms, peek-a-boo costumes, trapdoors, you have nothing to do with this.

I am sawing the woman in half – I devour
one part, repress the other.

Commodities are sold, productions are forgotten. You feed on this vertical system – the comfort of a semantic presence that you no longer have the strength to get tired of, or wary of. You are learning the *trip*, forgetting, as in an amnesia, the character of the places you left. The medium, verticality, threatens to become the predominant message.

Semantics: the souvenirs of tourism.

Centripetal as vertical.
Depth as set frame.
Context as reference.

☛ How much are we willing to destroy our attentiveness to the way words act and interact in order to gain the advantages of description or of representation and a phobia toward what is present? Centripetal motion is that of imposing contexts suitable for explanatory purposes – is this the one in the 'light' of which such actions are intelligible? Those impositions are usually cushioned by grammar (where syntax plays a representational role); without them, the language is a frontage. Not a false front, not a directive screen, but an unencumbered energy.

Grammar as constraining rules; meaning as constitutive rules – yet these latter are not imposed as a prior dictate. They issue forth instead from the inward shapes of the language.

Grammatical quicksand. Keep your place!
Syntax: the scaffolding of verticality.

Myth – the mask, the ideology, the technicolor escape, the promise of

transcendence in meaning. A regular reading has been a sideshow promoting semantic elixirs, imagist tonics. It's advertised to take a while to work: this *delay* between word and referent teases us; we reach the 'intent' or 'motive' only by indirection and without participating fully — enjoying the temporariness of the trip. Coitus interruptus.

•§ There is an other way. The vertical axis (downwards, as a ladder tempting us) need not structure the reading — for it does not structure the text. This is what I would mean by calling it non-referentially organized writing, as a subset of language-centered writing. Horizontal organizing principles, without an insistent (that is to say, imposed) depth. Secret meaning is not a hidden layer, but a hidden organization of the surface. Not latent, but quite handsomely manifest.

Meaning is not produced *by* the sign, but by the contexts we bring to the potentials of language — not enforced by a vertical elevator, the mark of the double, the vacation. The impulse toward excavation, toward contextual explanation, can be put in the background — for such a hollowing out of lower depths, of labyrinthine caves of signification, goes on within the gaps.

All light, all in broad daylight: bring your own context. Radiant surfaces; myth.

•§ An alternative remains 'wordness', 'eventism' — a way of *reconstituting* language by unpacking the tool box. The constitutive rules of meaning are not taking the words *away* from us. We can create those rules as we go along, and as we return, centrifugally, to center, centering, to surface, to degree zero, to sea level. We are urged back by the absence of imposed escapes! A semantic normality — a norm-iness (a worminess) is one such escape.

Signs which are constituted from paradigmatic rules, from their interaction (their play) with others, their trajectory without the dead weight of context.

•§ Atmospherically: what surrounds words may be more readily, and satisfyingly perceived than an iron cage of connection: referential connections which take place below the plane, out of sight, or earshot, therefore self-denyingly, without physique, or erotic delight.

The distinction between 'possession goals' and 'milieu goals'.

As in lowering the iron cage beneath the waters to be attacked by sharks, to be eaten alive by outside forces. Obedience to Authority vs. the improvisation of rules. If only the imposed representations could be loosed, deviance would be so much sweeter.

☛§ The first real presence is the awareness of absence, of no escape – of a vertical dimension acting only as an echo, a nostalgic reverb. Nothing is compressed from outside into familiar shapes & pleasing passage – the inwardness is the site of compression & density.

Language turns itself inside out for us.
Reversible vests; two-piece suits.

Signifieds provide echoes, harmonies, overtones, but not the principles of organization; the signifiers take on an atonality without shyness. There are external supports, but not protective blankets. Feet, not roots.

Events without trots.
Bottomless, negative space.

Confusion of realms, profusion of events and interplay on the surface. All, or mostly surface. The subject has disappeared behind the words only to emerge in front, or inside them. Presentations of the present, not representations of tense.

☛§ A more complicated topology than the virtuosos of reference had imagined: Rubber-Sheet Geometry. The one-sided surfaces. Any two points may be connected merely by starting at one point and tracing a path to the other without lifting the attention or carrying it over any boundary or separation.

Transference. *Différance*. A carnival of ciphers.

Fragmentation doesn't banish the references *embodied* in individual words; merely – they are not placed in a *series*, in grammar, in a row, *on a shelf*. A more playful anarchy, a Möbius free-for-all is created. Texts are themselves *signifieds*, not mere signifiers. TEXT: it requires no hermeneusis for it is itself one – of itself.

Gyroscopes.
Self-referring.
Ouroboros.

☛§ The consummation is concrete, graphic, erotic, physical, phenomenal, a greeting, not a keepsake. An absence embodied in a presence.
Words hover above usage. Meaning is not use, or is not all use. Meaning is the enabled incapacity to impose a usage.
Excommunication, rather than appropriation.

Words are the ghosts of regret.

Referentiality is diminished by organizing the language around other features or axes, around features which make present to us words' lack of transparency, their physicality, their refusal to be motivated along schematic lines by frames exterior to themselves. Refusing to 'point', or to be arranged according to a 'pointing system', they risk the charge of being pointless. That is, to be a self-sufficiency of event – confounding the inadequation of words and referents that we mistakenly call meaning. This is not meaning. Instead, this is meaning. *This*.

☛ If explanation is contextual, this counter-explanation is a rebuff which shows a larger possibility – an emptied cipher that speaks of all the productions we can fill it with. Each associative band, each band of semantic radiation, takes place with less guidance from the games and aims of representation or with little grammatical constraint. A carnival atmosphere, therefore ... workers' control ... self-management.

Commodification, on the other hand, requires clear signposts – Easy outs.

Language-centered work resembles an active myth-making. It resembles a creation of a community and of a world-view by a 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.

A publicity.

Depth is a spiral or whirligig – taken in stride, does not 'get in the way'. Not a tourniquet.

☛ The focus on the ways in which language can inscribe itself as other than reference. As an individuation *within* (but not compensating for) a community. Reading as a particular reading, an enactment, a co-Production. Here are the simultaneous co-creators of a smallish linguistic community. A scriptorium.

Counter-commodification: a barbaric, if politically apt term which spins around our scimmages against reference.

Writing as action; reading as action, not a behavior *observed by* a text, sitting there, bored, looking at us.

Binary, with the text as switchman.

Blurs, so fast = mesh

Texts read the reader.

☛§ Altering textual roles might bring us closer to altering the larger social roles of which textual ones are a feature. READING: not the glazed gaze of the consumer, but the careful attention of a producer, or co-producer. The transformer. (capacitators? resistors?) Full of care. It's not a product that is produce, but a *production*, an event, a praxis, a model for future practice. The domination of nature can find a critique here as well – not in abstinence. Not aleatory.

From each according to
To each according to

A semantic atmosphere, or milieu, rather than the possessive individualism of reference.

Indexicality.

Absolute.

Absolution.

Such work has a utopian force only begun to be revealed.

☛§ Language is an Other which imposed meanings attempt, luckily unsuccessfully, to disguise for us. The 'Primal Lack'. Life against death. It is not a monologic communication, but a spatial interaction foregrounded within a frame of our own generosity. Our gifts, its physical integrity.

Stay inside. It is all here. The non-imperial state: without need for the expansion or externalization that comes from the refusal to redistribute the surplus at home. The same holds for a non-imperial or language-centered writing.

Surplus of signifier = the floating signifier. *Mana*. trace.

Engulfment, flooding of signifiers without predetermined signification. Instead, the clichés of existentialism – freedom, surplus of signifiers, *choice as constitutive* & we do it ourselves.

Politics not concealed any longer.

Decontextualization.

☛§ References *evacuate* the sign. In its place, intentionality fills it up – contributed both by reader and writer. This is a self-conscious (at times, self-referring) intention capable of acknowledging the Other, a sense of absence. It finds a cure in communal consort, in concert, without the mediation of obedience, without the *orders* of reference.

What is made concrete is what is truly absent [unity – the world as one, a toppling of Babel], and not what is tantalizingly withheld or delayed only to be theatrically hawked and consumed [reference – the world as split, the divisiveness and / or repressiveness of outside imposed content] Repression as the delayed gratification of unity.

Works seem the embodiment, the bodying forth of this string of lights connecting reader and writer, reader and text. We speak of a 'body of work' – by this, what do we mean: the body politic, love's body. Embodiment is the needed copulation – of practices. No longer repressed, the two spheres are fused.

¶ As if the references offered could be known, through the act of appropriating them! Representation is ownership. Yet the *meant* (the signifiers) completely outdistances the *known* (the signifieds, what is referred to). We come, historically, for the sake of a denying and repressive order, to be satisfied with what can be known, owned, consumed, referred to, easily intersubjectively communicated, predicted, controlled. Lost are some of the physical ways of intending, of expressing, of meaning, of motion, of pronouncing, sobbing: the overabundance of signifier, the excessive presence, the unconscious, the sign's arbitrary nature. Otherliness – we are emancipated only by recognition, or, occasionally, by the conjugation of reading and writing, in completing language's own work and words. Not duality. Readers do the rewriting. Sometimes they do enough to give a social force to the absences they are first given.

References are not foregrounded. The body of work is not organized around the referential axis. Therefore, is not genitally organized? No 'discharge' of a specific substantive kind leaves the polymorphous play of the linguistic units. The genital organization is monarchic, or mimetic (from the family circle). Language-centering seems to capture some of the more exploratory aspects of the consequences of itself, without referential guidance, without parental guidance, without tense. *Not a compensation*, or its prime model: ego armor.

What is collective as signifier as unconscious – does not atomize or individualize in the ways references have. Lost – through a castration complex, an incestuous access eliminated by the triumph of market conditions and kinship, an imposed outward order of signification?

How have we come to the words, to our selves, our absenting community – all flesh, all fleshed together.

The community which is unified, self-contained, mercantilist, unwilling to break down into spheres – resisting the division of labor (and hierarchy) that comes with literacy. Is this an incestual nostalgia

for illiteracy? A polymorphous lettrism, a movement into *script*,
grapheme, *syllable*, *cipher*, *glyph*, *gloss*, *corpus*?

Readers embody texts.

Physical language.

RAY DIPALMA

Crystals

☛§ You must talk with two tongues, if you do not wish to cause confusion. WYNDHAM LEWIS

☛§ One invents a technique or procedure by oneself; one does not invent entirely on one's own *a state of mind*. JUAN GRIS

☛§ Twenty-nine words from TREMOLO: Term, tole, tome, tool, tore, retool, role, rote, room, root, rotl, roto, metro, melt, merl, mole, molt, mort, morel, mote, motor, motel, moor, moot, oleo, omer, loom, loot, lore.

☛§ The schematism by which ... [one understands] the ... world ... is ... deeply hidden ... IMMANUEL KANT

☛§ The tragedy of the writer is that he might only be himself.
EDWARD DAHLBERG

☛§ Grammar in relation to a tree and two horses. GERTRUDE STEIN

☛§ Bad writing comes from insufficient curiosity. EZRA POUND

☛§ Patrons and staff are urged to stay out of work areas which are marked by warning signs. There is the danger of falling debris and unsafe footing. The reality of renovation will become increasingly apparent with a growing army of workmen, activity everywhere, and distracting noise as the project gains momentum. A construction fence will soon be erected around exterior portions.

☛§ I shall derive my emotions solely from the arrangement of surfaces, I shall present my emotions by the arrangement of my surfaces, the planes and lines by which they are defined. GAUDIER-BRZESKA

☛§ Many a single word ... is itself a concentrated poem, having stores of poetical thought and imagery laid up in it.
RICHARD CHEVENIX TRENCH

☛§ I forget most of what I read; nonetheless it contributes to the preservation of my mind. LICHTENBERG

☛§ Do not be bewildered by the surfaces; in the depths all becomes law.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

☛§ A crowd of naked people stands around ... others ride aimlessly in circles ... Still others swim languidly ... There are birds, flowers, fruits. The girls' hair falls straight with only a hint of wave. A few black men and women mingle with the white groups, peacefully accepted ...

☛§ Gesture ... rendering visible ... the structural rhythm. JAMES JOYCE

☛§ Nourish, nourish, feed your friends,
Tell them not to fear the worm today. ASA BENVENISTE

☛§ The spacious probes of atonality ...

☛§ Successions of words are so agreeable. GERTRUDE STEIN

☛§ Nature geometrized. SIR THOMAS BROWNE

☛§ The interval has all the rights ROSMARIE WALDROP

☛§ *Ron Silliman*: Star, Temperance, Death, Moon, Strength, Justice,
Justice, Strength, Hanged Man, Fool, Death

Bruce Andrews: Magician, Star, Judgement, Priestess, Emperor, Fool,
Death, Empress, Star, Emperor, Judgement, Moon

Steve McCaffery: Moon, Sun, Emperor, Judgement, Emperor, Hanged
Man, Priestess, Priestess, Fool, Hierophant, Hierophant, Emperor,
Star, World

☛§ It is not I who create myself, rather I happen to myself. C.G. JUNG

☛§ The chief claim of the Cabala, and of all illuminist doctrines, was to the possession of powers to unfold the secrets and mysteries of creation and particularly to reveal and explain the divine nature of God.

ENID STARKIE

☛§ Think of how they avoid around. GERTRUDE STEIN

☛§ The desire to penetrate into the nature of form, to understand the space it occupies itself and the space in which it is situated, brought about a searching analysis in which the familiar contours of its surface have all simultaneously forfeited their customary opaqueness. The

screen of outward appearances has been made to undergo a crystallization which renders it more transparent. Each facet has been stood on edge so as to allow us to appreciate the volumes that lie beneath the surface. Instead of being invited to caress with a glance a smooth outer skin we are presented with a transparent honeycomb construction in which surface and depth are both visible. ROLAND PENROSE

☛ Language disguises thought ... WITTGENSTEIN

☛ The development of my work has been, I feel, more subconscious than unconscious. I do not work by intellectual deductions. My work is a kind of self-contained contemplation. MARK TOBEY

☛ ... Cézanne ... gave me a new feeling about composition ... I was obsessed by the idea of composition ... it was not solely the realism of the characters but the realism of the composition which was the important thing. GERTRUDE STEIN

☛ The value of the ideogrammic method is that it enables you to make statements that don't exceed your knowledge. HUGH KENNER

☛ A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things. ERNEST FENOLLOSA

☛ We don't get free of the idea that the sense of a sentence accompanies the sentence: is there alongside it. WITTGENSTEIN

☛ If we look at an isolated printed word and repeat it long enough, it ends by assuming an entirely unnatural aspect ... its body is indeed there, but its soul is fled. It is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity. We never before attended to it in this way, but habitually got it clad with its meaning the moment we caught sight of it, and rapidly passed from it to the other words of the phrase. We apprehended it, in short, with a cloud of associates, and thus perceiving it, we felt it quite otherwise than as we feel it now, divested and alone. WILLIAM JAMES

RON SILLIMAN

For Open Letter

Steve,

The historical function of language-centered writing is to achieve, to the greatest extent possible, a post-referential writing. There is a crucial distinction between non-referential and post-referential poetics which has only recently become clear. The term 'non-referential' was first used by Bob Grenier six or seven years ago to describe his work. His two major sequences, *A Day at the Beach*, and *Sentences*, and Clark Coolidge's early long poems, *The Maintains* and *Polaroid*, may be identified as the major products of the non-referential tendency. The very form of the term 'non-referential' reveals its essentially diacritical nature. It negates reference, typically doing so by the utilization of specific contexts. Perhaps more important than the works of non-referentiality was the fact that it revealed referential works as objects of a specific type.

Reference has always been an element in language. Its primary form is the combination of a gesture and an object, such as the picking up of a rock or one fragment (thereby creating a 'tool'). Referentiality, in the narrow sense in which I am using the term here, is a specific historical deformation of reference.

At an early historical stage, poems were the shared language events of small tribal groups. The value of the poem was one of exchange and use. It was the product and common property of the tribe and not the individual. The language of the poem was physical and alive to its speakers. It had its own integrity and recognized the separate integrity of the world. It was empowered to discuss the world but did not presume to describe it. It was the gesture and not the object. The joy in language was that which any man or woman feels in any act of creative labour. One sees evidences of this reality everywhere in the tribal poetics of the world, much of which has been made commonly available by the work of Jerry Rothenberg. One even sees its traces in early English literature. Rhyme is an ordering of language by its physical elements. The physicality of language as a determining element commonly recognized by all speakers is a precondition of any such ordering.

One need only point to the fact of Evelyn Wood and speed-reading to get a sense that there has been a drastic change. Language has changed and with it there have been changes in the art of language, in the poem.

In the preface to the 1948 Origin edition of *A* 1-12, Louis (pronounced 'Lewie') Zukofsky projected the possibility of a

'scientific' definition of poetry, true for all poems past and future. What Zukofsky, a Marxist, should have known (but the historical preconditions for such a knowledge were not yet present) was that the stage of historical development determines the natural laws of the poem. Indeed, the stage of historical development determines the natural laws of language.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that in history and in society all 'laws' have the nature of a tendency.

At a certain post-tribal stage of development, the world of natural objects was replaced by a world of things. The defining characteristic of a thing is its double-projection: it is both the end result of a labour process (a product) and an object for general social consumption (a commodity). A thing is a schizoid object. A world of such things is madness. The resolution of this dual projection can only occur when the productive forces control the means of production and consumption: in short, communism.

If such a resolution does not (as has been the case everywhere in the world) occur, then a struggle arises between the opposing projections. When one set of forces is dominant, the other is repressed. This has taken place not simply in the market-place, but in every aspect of society and humanity. It has determined consciousness.

The repression of the product* (labour) nature of things is called the commodity fetish. In language it is a fetish of description, of reference and has a second higher-order fetish of narration. It is the picture Wittgenstein could not get outside (for it lay in his language and his language seemed to repeat it to him inexorably). It is the object without the gesture. The object appears now to move of its own free will. We are, all of us, suffering from a mass aphasia. Language-centered writing is a step on the road to health.

The English language lost its product-nature gradually over a period of 400 years. The new commodity language gradually took on new descriptive powers. It was now able to describe the world. This process was a complex one, which can be discussed at many levels. One major event was the origin of the *book* of poems in 1557. If the very invention of an alphabet is the first step toward the taking of the language out of the person (so that, generations later one learns grammar as an external 'objective' fact), the book made the commoditization of the poem much easier. It is in fact the most typical commodity manifestation imaginable. The poet no longer could see his audience. He was no longer a member of a small tribal group, but now was an author, had himself undergone a division of labour. By 1750, the subjective use of capital letters and italics had been replaced by 'modern conventional' usage. Variants of the poem, such as the novel and literary criticism, had begun to look and act like separate

phenomena (which they are not). Still, in the eighteenth century the reader in England was expected to bind his or her book to fit the style of his library, a curious counter-tendency (history is full of them) whose only modern remnant is the binding style of encyclopedias and law books in imitation of such styles.

The ultimate act of the commoditized poem is the novel in which the now passive reader (this too a division of labour) stares at a 'blank' page while a story appears to unfold miraculously in front of his or her eyes.

The wonderful thing about repression is that, in the end, it never works. The history of modern literature is that of a continuous struggle between the forces of commodity language (the capitalists) and those of product language (the working class).

Consider the novel. Born well within the commodity fetish, it does not comprehend that it is doubly bound by the gravitational forces of language and history. It assumes that it can evolve 'freely.' Like a rocket with insufficient thrust, it begins (around 1900) to fall back into the atmosphere of language. Thus the 'crisis' of the novel, which takes three specific forms.

The modernists recognize the fact of language and thereby attempt to re-enter the atmosphere, leading to all manifestations of the art-novel. In fact, some of these works, such as *Visions of Cody* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, are among the great poems of our time. Another manifestation of this form is the novelist who writes for, and is read by, poets: Douglas Woolf, Paul Metcalf, Harry Matthews, Kathy Acker, Fielding Dawson, etc.

The fully commoditized novelists turn to the production of just such a type of literature: Mario Puzo, Peter Benchley, Leon Uris.

A third form jettisons language and takes over a new art form made possible by capitalist technology: film. The lone author of 1850 is, by 1950, now a film *company* with a completely stratified labour force: grips, best boys, rewrite specialists. And, of course, a group of producers who now own the means of production.

Every major type of modernism can be seen as attempts at eliminating the repression of the commodity fetish in language. The surrealists are a particularly positivist manifestation: dream narrative cannot break the narrative fetish for it lies within its boundaries. Joyce attempts to get back to language but for him language is not Saussurian but is etymologies. Hemmingway attempts an art of the sentence in which the ordering of the objects preceeds the ordering of the words (in that view, to get to language you must forget the words). The projectivist tendency from Pound and Williams to Eshleman and Kelly tries to get a new theory of the ordering of words, even a physical one, but it is highly individualist and predicated upon a

metaphoric relation of the page to 'scored speech.'

It is not an accident that every modernist approach has failed. Because they start within the commodity fetish of language, they can quickly be reduced to commodities in turn. This is enough to kill them. Let me present a picture as ugly as it is real. With very few exceptions, a modern poet is successful as a commodity for no more than five years. During this period he or she is in constant demand for readings, has a plethora of publications (leading inevitably to over-production) and is the subject of numerous critical articles, books, etc.

Consider what happens when over-production (not of poems, but of commodities, books of poems) hits a poet. People who have read him or her now begin to stop. The market drops out and, in turn, a new poet is elevated, becomes chic and is similarly chewed up by the process. I can think of numerous examples: Robert Kelly, Jim Tate, Robert Duncan, Clayton Eshleman, Denise Levertov, Anne Waldman, anyone you care to name.

The 'art of the difficult' aspect of modernism is a defense mechanism. By difficulty, a writer makes it harder to be absorbed and commoditized. It is a form of buying time. It is a sad thing to watch. It never works.

Language-centered writing, which this is, has a direct historical predecessor in Russian Futurism. These groups have two things in common which suggest a higher order of struggle: (1) they place language at the center of their work, (2) they place their work directly into a program of conscious and active class-struggle. They recognize that every creative act is, in its essence, revolutionary. For art has a dual function: interiorizing the group by ordering sense perceptions (leading to group culture and group consciousness) and by connecting the individual writer with the 'other,' which is the world of his or her group. It is just these dialectical forms and connections which the repressing element of the commodity fetish attempts to hide.

Russian Futurism took place in a revolutionary period, but one which resulted not in a communist state, but in a state capital one. The narrative fetish of social realism is the highest form of the commodity fetish. What took place in Russia was a later form of the nineteenth century bourgeois revolutions. Thus Russian Futurism was a counter-tendency, which is to be expected whenever the historical moment is in great flux. When the stage of historical development it arose in passed, its days were numbered.

Language-centered writing can take many forms. It is first of all activity conscious of itself. Its attempt is the spelling out of all the deformations of language which result from the repressing mechanism of the commodity fetish. It discusses the world and does not describe it. It does not impose 'reality' on the reader by fiat. It calls

attention to the words it is using. It shows that the great rush of energy one gets in any good poem is nothing other than dialectical consciousness itself. It is not the 'end of the novel' nor of literary criticism, but is their return to the poem itself.

It is the first step (and only that) of the return of the poem to the people. It is a politicized poem and not a 'political poem' (which is a counter-tendency occurring within the commodity fetish). It tells you that these words are empty until you fill them with your presence, reading them, being them. Together, you and these words could do anything.

Permanent Revolution,
Ron.

★

If understood too generally, the term *product* can be misleading. It is not another term for *commodity*, but rather is the inverse: a separate nature inherent in the object diametrically opposed to its commodity nature. In Lacanian terminology, such an object would be considered 'overdetermined.' In a recent essay on the social origins of referentiality ('Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,' *Red Herring*, forthcoming), I use the terms *gesture* and *gestural* to indicate the product nature of language in both tribal poetics and that of post-tribal pre-capitalist societies:

In its primary form, reference takes the character of a gesture and an object, such as the picking up of a stone to be used as a tool. Both gesture and object carry their own integrities and are not confused: a sequence of gestures is distinct from the objects which may be involved, as distinct as the labour process is from its resultant commodities. A sequence of gestures forms a discourse, not a description. It is precisely the expressive integrity of the gestural nature of language which constitutes the meaning of the 'nonsense' syllables in tribal poetries; its persistence in such characteristics of Skelton's poetry as its rhyme is that of a trace.

It is just this capability of capitalism to render a portion of the world invisible which Marx had in mind when, in the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he wrote that

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Some other applications of this repressive capacity of capitalist development are discussed quite cogently by John and Barbara Ehrenreich in 'Work and Consciousness,' *Monthly Review*, July-August, 1976, pp. 10-18.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

Stray Straws and Straw Men

1. 'I look straight into my heart & write the exact words that come from within. The theory of fragments whereby poetry becomes a grab bag of favorite items — packed neatly together with the glue of self-conscious & self-consciously epic composition, or, lately, homogenized into one blend by the machine of programmatic form — is a diversion. The eye is not split open in such work. There are structures — edifices — wilder than the charts of rivers, but they are etched by making a path not designing a garden.'

'Natural: the very word should be struck from the language.'

'... but what the devil is the human?'

2. Ron Silliman has consistently written a poetry of visible borders: a poetry of shape. His works are composed very explicitly under various conditions, presenting a variety of possible worlds, possible language formations. Such poetry emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed, everywhere circumscribed by grammar & syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, organized, & so an artifice, artifactual, an artifact — monadic, solipsistic, homemade, manufactured, mechanized & formulaic at some points: willful.

3. Work described as this may discomfort those who want a poetry primarily of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily. Perhaps the conviction is that poetry not be made by fitting words into a pattern but by the act of actually letting it happen, *writing*, so that that which is 'stored within pours out' without reference to making a point any more than to making a shape. The thing is not to create programmes to plug words into but to eliminate such imposed interferences.

An influence of work that appears to be of this (other) type is the sanctification of something that gets known as its honesty, its directness, its authenticity, its artlessness, its sincerity, its spontaneity, its personal expressiveness; in short, its 'naturalness.' (As the pastoral was once the natural, & likewise the romantic.)

I would point to Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* as a work that seems rooted in some of these ('natural') assumptions, as well as to much of Kerouac. In a different way, & the look of the work is the measure of how different, Frank O'Hara's poetry is relevant. The achievement of

these three poets has much to do with how they have fronted these assumptions.

4. Personal subject matter & a flowing syntax, whatever those descriptions mean to a particular writer, are the key to the natural look. (Though it needs to be said that the variety of writing that relies on some sense of natural for its inspiration & domain is infinite.)

5. The sexual, for example, has much the pull of the natural. For some it poses as the most intimate subject matter. Others have it as the energy that drives their writing, or else its source.

Edward Dahlberg (sexistly) describes Word as Cock. 'Masculine fiery particles,' 'motions of will,' he says, animate the great writing of the past. He rebukes American literature for not being grounded in the Flesh, describing it as stagnant, dehumanized, & frigid. 'Esoteric artificers' & 'abstruse technicians,' our writers — Poe, Dickinson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville & those before & after — have led away from 'the communal song of labor, sky, star, field, love.'

6. There is also an attraction toward looking for the natural in 'direct experience,' both in terms of recording the actual way objective reality is perceived (the search for the objective) & making the writing a recording instrument of consciousness.

'This work I experience as an instance of the writer's fantasy & imagination & vision & not as a construction. I feel immersed in it. It seems seamless to me. I am carried along by it. The experience is present to me. Shifts in tone, place occur as inevitable sequences: inevitable because they cohere, because they allow me to experience them, because they seem to happen.'

7. 'Technical artifice' they scream, as if poetry doesn't demand a technical precision. ('That poetry is an art, an art with technique, with media, an art that must be in constant flux, a constant change of manner.') Technicians of the human.

8. A sign of the particularity of a piece of writing is that it contains itself, has established its own place, situates itself next to us. We move up close, stare in, & see a world. It has moving parts, accountable & unaccountable occurrences, a particular light, a heavy dense odor. 'But can I actually experience it?' Yes. But it reveals the conditions of its occurrence at the same time as it is experienced. So I don't feel a part of it as much as facing it. ... Of course at times you forget. All of a sudden a few hours, a week, flash by before you actually notice, & you say to yourself 'how the time slips —'

9. 'Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the Workman whose work we are.'

Next to. Fronting the world with a particular constellation of beliefs, values, memories, expectations; a culture; a way of seeing, mythography; language. But we are 'beside ourselves in a sane way' for what is beside us is also ourselves. At the same time in & beside. — The signs of language, of a piece of writing, are not artificial contructions, mere structures, 'mere naming.' They do not sit, deanimated, as symbols in a code, dummies for things of nature they refer to; but are, of themselves, of ourselves, whatever is such. 'Substance.' 'Actuality.' 'Presence.' The very plane through which we front the world, by which the world is.

10. Compare / these two views / of what / poetry / is.

In the one, an instance (a recording perhaps) of reality / fantasy / experience / event is presented to us through the writing.

In the other, the writing itself is seen as an instance of reality / fantasy / experience / event.

11. Another example.

The sanctification of the natural comes up in terms of 'voice' & has been extended by various excursions into the oral. On the one hand, there is the assumption that poetry matures in the location of 'one's own voice' which as often as not is no more than a consistency of style & presentation. 'The voice of the poet' is an easy way of contextualizing poetry so that it can be more readily understood (indiscriminately plugged into) as listening to someone talk in their distinctive manner (i.e., listen for the person beyond or underneath the poem); but this theatricalization does not necessarily do the individual poem any service & has the tendency to reduce the body of a poet's work to little more than personality. (This contrasts with that major preoccupation in American poetry — the investigation of the grammar of talking, of speech, both by traditional poetic technique &, lately, by tape transcription.) On the other hand, there is a growing use of voice in a variety of sound poetry. Some performance & audiotape works use voice as essentially a vocabulary to be processed by techniques such as cut-up, consonant & vowel intonation, simultaneity, etc. Others, searching for the 'natchuralness' of an oral liturgy we've lost, & influenced by tribal & religious & bardic — communal — poetic practice, make use of vocalizations related to the human breath (e.g., chanting & other assorted organic sounding tones). — Voice is a possibility for poetry not an essence.

12. I am not making a distinction, there is no useful distinction to be made here, between making the poem a subject or an object. Nor is it necessary to choose up among the personal desire to communicate, tell what has been seen, share a way of seeing, transmit some insight, irony, or simply give a feeling for texture.

What I want to call attention to is that there is no natural writing style; that the preference for its supposed manifestations is simply a preference for a particular look to poetry & often a particular vocabulary (usually perceived as personal themes); that this preference (essentially a procedural decision to work within a certain domain sanctified into a rite of poetry) actually obscures the understanding of the work which appears to be its honoured bases; & especially that the cant of 'make it personal' & 'let it flow' are avoidances — by mystification — of some very compelling problems that swirl around truth-telling, confession, bad faith, false self, authenticity, virtue, etc.

13. The considerable achievement of Frank O'Hara is to have a form of poetry largely within the domain of the personal. Note, however, that O'Hara's word 'personism' is not 'personalism'; it acknowledges the work to be a fronting of another *person* — another mind, if you will, as much as another nature. O'Hara's work *proposes* a domain of the personal, & not simply *assuming* it, fully works it out. His remarkable use of voice, for example, allows, through a musing whimsy in that voice, for fantasy as wild as any surrealist imagines, contained, still, within his proposed boundaries.

14. There is no automatic writing. It is a claim that has had to be made to the detractors of modernism again & again (an early article by B.F. Skinner attacked 'Stein's little secret') & must now be made another time to avoid accepting as a value an analysis generated out of misunderstanding & animosity.

Not that the followers of the natural, or the organic, or the personal, would necessarily have work that looks automatic. But it seems to me that this is at the heart of the strongest claim to natural spontaneous writing — the impulse to record or transcribe the movements & make-up of one's consciousness. The modernist assumption. What's to note is that in practice, projectively, that impulse transposes itself to something like a search for a method of 'syntacticalizing consciousness', i.e., ordering one's consciousness into language; as if consciousness existed prior to — aside from — language & had to be 'put into' it; as if consciousness were not itself a syntacticalization — a syntaxophony.

Every phrase I write, every juxtaposition I make, is a manifestation of using a full-blown language: full of possibilities of meaning & impossibilities of meaning. It can't be avoided. Whatever comes out

comes out on account of a variety of psychological dispositions, personal experiences, & literary preoccupations & preconceptions. The best of the writing that gets called automatic issues from a series of choices as deliberate & reflected as can be.

15. Whatever gets written gets written in a particular shape, uses a particular vocabulary & syntax, & a variety of chosen techniques. Whether its shape, syntax & vocabulary result from an attraction (or ideological attachment to) the organic & spontaneous, or to some other look, it is equally chosen. Sometimes this process takes place intuitively or unconsciously (the pull of influence comes in here since somewhere in the back of your mind are models for what looks natural, personal, magical, mystical, spontaneous, automatic, dream-like, confessional, didactic, shocking). Sometimes it is a very conscious process. Any way, you're responsible for what turns up. Free association, for example, is no more inherently 'natural' than cutting up: & neither is in any sense 'random'. One technique may be used because a decision is made to use subconscious material. Another may be used to limit the vocabulary of the poem to words not self-generated. In either case, various formal decisions are made & these decisions shape the work.

16. Okay, given that, it's given, is it possible to continue under conditions set up before? Or is everything, every instance, a new decision at each moment? & recklessly charging forward it appears to copy some other thing, or be beholding, or under. What happens when the images cease, when there are no more images confronting the eye of imagination & still the signs, the written traces of activity, continue to be produced. Music sounds. It too must pass. A syntactical exploration of consciousness becomes very explicitly the concern, so imbedded even in a subject matter of boundaries & possible worlds, that it ceases to be, or only diverts. The subject matter simply all that is inside, given rhythm, different cadences, the punctuation in typing of each letter as separate unit, the propulsion of a comma. Is it possible, for example, to allow typographical errors, mistypings, to remain integral? Typing itself then becoming a condition. It becomes part of the temptation. Or perhaps it's just my fear that when I tap what I find inside myself I will find that it is empty & insist that the scratchings must account for something.

17. Writing necessarily consists of attaching numerous bits & pieces together in a variety of ways. & it comes to a point where you feel any composition is an artifice & a deceit. & the more 'natural' the look the more deceptive. That any use of language outside its function of

communicating in speaking is a falsehood (cf. Laura Riding). Or even, that language itself — everywhere conditioning our way of seeing & meaning — is an illusion (as if there were some thing outside language!)

Or take it this way: I want to just write — let it come out — get in touch with some natural process — from brain to pen — with no interference of typewriter, formal pattern. & it can seem like the language itself — having to put it into words — any kind of fixing a version of it — gets in the way. That I just have this thing inside me — silently — unconditioned by the choices I need to make when I write — whether it be to write it down or write on. So it is as if language itself gets in the way of expressing this thing, this flow, this movement of consciousness.

But there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it. Its conditions always interpose themselves: a particular set of words to choose from (a vocabulary), a way of processing those words (syntax, grammar): the natural conditions of language. What pulses, pushes, is energy, spirit, anima, dream, fantasy: coming out always in form, as shape: these particulars, 'massed at material bottoms' in hum of this time — here, now — these words, this syntax & rhythm & shape. The look of the natural as constructed, programmatic — artful — 'lying words' as the most abstract, composed or formal work.

18. There is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is intended, chosen. That is what makes a thing a poem. Modes cannot be escaped, but they can be taken for granted. They can also be meant.

Work like Silliman's explicitly acknowledges these conditions of poetry, language, by explicitly intending vocabulary, syntax, shape, etc.; an acknowledgement which is the actual prerequisite of authenticity, of good faith. The allure of the spontaneous & personal is cut here by the fact of wordness: reproducing not so much the look of the natural as the conditions of nature — autonomy, self-sufficiency. In this light, a work like Mayer's *Memory* can be seen to be significant not on account of its journal-like look alone but also on account of its completely intended, complex, artifactual style. Heavy, dense, embedded. 'The essential thing is to build a world.' Energy & emotion, spontaneity, vocabulary, shape — all are elements of that building. It is natural that there are modes but there is no natural mode.

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