

A Hundred Posters

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Alan Davies P.O. Box 415, Kenmore Sta. Boston Ma. 02215

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Ron Silliman:

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WORD, APPEARANCE OF THE WORLD

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group."

Sapir, 1929

"The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

Marx, 1859

One anomaly of contemporary existence which has received little critical analysis is the persistence of "typos" in foreign language films from the industrialized nations. A typical example would be the omission of an r in the word "your" in Tanner's recent Jonah who will be 25 in the year 2000. Since a film such as Jonah (or those directed by Truffaut, Bergman or Wertmeuller) is made with at least one eye on distribution to the Anglo-American market, such errata cannot be sufficiently explained away as a consequence of the precarious and somewhat secondary existence of an export print (which, on occasion, is even re-edited for the new market, as was Roeg's The Man Who Fell to Earth). The fact remains that in current bourgeois cinema, attention to the development of all visio-spatial information is total. That the disruptive nature of typographical errors in sub-titles is not noticed and corrected is a sign that it is not felt.

This links it to a broad variety of other social phenomena, such as the method of speed-reading in which individual words recede and are replaced by a Gestalt comprehension of content, or the techniques developed for display advertising and product packaging (including mass market publishing) for the printing of information which, for any number of reasons (e.g., it is considered "inessential" such as the identification of the jacket designer, or possibly counterproductive to sales, such as a listing of chemical additives in canned foods), the producer does not wish the potential customer to read. Linguistically, the most revealing detail of Noam Chomsky's Reflections on Language may well be the ISBN number on its rear cover, printed in a different direction and in a lighter color than the rest of that page's text.

A McLuhanist interpretation, further linking these to even broader social facts such as the rise, and subsequent crisis, of the novel or modernist tendencies in art in general, would not be incorrect as such, but would fail to sufficiently explain the underlying social reasons for the phenomena and thereby fail to suggest an appropriate course for action by art workers generally and specifically by writers.

For several years I have been involved in a series of investigations (Language Games, The Chinese Notebook and aRb) predicated upon Louis Zukofsky's projection of a possible "scientific" definition of poetry (first outlined by him in the preface to the 1948 Origin edition of A 1-12). While the third investigation is still in progress, some fairly specific statements concerning the object of inquiry can be made: (1) the stage of historical development determines the natural laws (or, if you prefer the terminology, the underlying structures) of poetry; (2) the stage of historical development determines the natural laws of language; (3) the primary impact on language, and language arts, of the rise of capitalism has been in the area of reference and is directly related to the phenomena known as the commodity fetish. It is this effect of the rise of capitalism, particularly in its later state and monopoly forms, which underlies the effaced r in Jonah.

The essential nature of the social determination of consciousness has largely been misinterpreted by Marxists and non-Marxists alike. Thus Chomsky, feeling social determinism to be in contradiction to his innateness thesis, writes:

Gramsci went so far as to argue that "the fundamental innovation introduced by Marxism into the science of politics and history is the proof that there does not exist an abstract, fixed and immutable 'human nature'... but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations"...--a statement that is surely false, in that there is no such proof, and a questionable reading of Marx.

(Chomsky, 1975, p. 128)

While Gramsci's formulation constitutes an implicit oversimplification (leading, for example, to behaviorist errors and the idea that human nature can be altered in short periods of time), proofs

of the social determination of consciousness do exist. The elaboration of the tool-making capacity of the australopithicene required an expansion of the frontal area of the cerebral cortex and the hominid brain consequently grew from 500 cc. 1,500,000 years ago to 1100 cc. 350,000 years ago and eventually to the modern 1400 cc. (Robert J. Maxwell in Yaker et al, 1971, p. 39) Most of the "innate cognitive capacity" of Chomsky's thesis is indeed the result of a "mode of production of material life." He and Gramsci are equally guilty of the gross application of a complex reality.

The question before us is, however, of a much more specific nature than the social determination of all innate cognitive capacity: the impact of emergence of capitalism on language and the language arts. This question can be restated as Does capitalism have a specific "reality" which is passed through the language and thereby imposed on its speakers? Thus framed, the question can be answered affirmatively.

First we need to note some key differences in the language use of groups which have not as yet been thoroughly totalized into the global class structure of monopoly and state capitalism. Because writing typically occurs in a society which has already undergone significant divisions of labor (i.e., historical development), the best sources of any relatively tribal literature exist in modern ethnological transcriptions, rather than in the early written records of the Judeo-Christian civilization. The following is an English language translation of a Fox tribe sweatbath poem:

A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni agi ya ni  
Sky  
A gi ya ni i a gi ya ni  
A gi ya ni i a gi ya ni  
A gi ya ni

(Rothenberg, 1972, p. 341)

The presence of "nonsense" syllables in tribal literature is unmistakable. Save for attempts at specifically anthropological explanations, there is no room in contemporary literary theory for a poetry of this kind, no existing mechanism for positing it coherently alongside the work of Dante, Li Po or Tzara. The fact that there have been as yet few attempts to incorporate such materials into "comparative literature" curricula by the educational system of the industrial nations is not simply attributable to racism, though racism inevitably plays a role. Rather, it is that in the reality of capitalism (or of any society well down the road toward capitalist modes of production) there is no meaning here.

But capitalism did not spring up overnight amid loose associations of groups at a tribal stage of development. It came into existence through a long succession of stages, each with its own characteristic modes of production and social relations. While the literature of a people about to enter into the stage of capitalism through bourgeois revolution will necessarily be much closer to our

own experience, differences can still be observed. The following are the first eleven lines of "The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummyng" by John Skelton, written in about 1517:

Tell you I chyll,  
If that ye wyll  
A whyle be styll,  
Of a comely gyll  
That dwelt on a hyll;  
But she is not gryll,  
For she is somewhat sage  
And well worne in age,  
For her vysage  
It woltdt aswage  
A mannes courage.

(Sylvester, 1974, p. 69)

Only one word (gryll, meaning "fierce") has dropped from the vocabulary. Shifts of spelling, pronunciation and syntactic structure are more visible (largely explicable by the standardizing effect of printing -- Caxton's press was only forty years old when these lines were written), but the most obvious difference between Skelton's poetry and the modern is its use of rhyme: eleven consecutive end-rhymes using only two endings, -yll and -age, plus five other instances of internal rhyme and off-rhyme (tell, whyle, dwelt, well, woltdt). This is the inverse of the effaced r of Jonah: it is an ordering of the language by its physical characteristics, its "non-linguistic" ones, a sign that this dimension is felt.

Another characteristic trait of the English poetry of 400 years ago is its almost exclusive focus upon either love, the ontological project of the period, or religious and heroic themes passed down from the traditions of colonial invaders, works to be valued as rearticulations rather than as sensuous apprehensions of the experiential. It was not the purpose of the language in the 16th century poem to describe the daily life of even the bourgeois, let alone the common man.

What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism," the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the nature of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed (deformed) into referentiality.

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 labor 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 his rhyme is that of a trace.

The individual within the tribal society had not been reduced to wage labor, nor did the reproduction of his or her material life require the consumption of a significant number of commodities created through the labor of others. The world of natural and self-created objects is decidedly different from the world of things.

As men changed the world they expanded and refined their ability to know it, and the growing capacity for cognition again enhanced their ability to change it. Man creates himself by his works; by his estrangement from himself he becomes his own creator.

(Fischer, 1970, pp. 152-3)

A thing is at once both the end product of a labor process and a commodity of general social consumption. A thing is a schizoid object. Or, to use Lacanian terminology, a thing is an overdetermined object. A world which is made up of such dual projections can only be resolved when the forces of production control both the means of production and consumption.

Wherever such a resolution is not the case, then a struggle arises between the opposing projections: class struggle over consciousness. Where the bourgeois is the rising class, the expressive, gestural, labor-product nature of consciousness tends to be repressed. The objects of consciousness are reduced to commodities and take on the character of a fetish. Things which appear to move "freely," absent all gesture, are the elements of a world of description. The commodity fetish in language becomes one of description, of the referential, and has a second higher-order fetish of narration.

115. A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

(Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 48e)

This mass aphasia within the English language occurs gradually over a period of 400 years. The rise of capitalism sets the preconditions for the rise of the novel, the invention of the optical illusion of realism, the final breakdown of gestural poetic forms, and the separation of self-consciousness of the art-object from the consciousness of the object itself in the rise of literary criticism.

Repression does not, fortunately, abolish the existence of the repressed element which continues as a contradiction, often invisible, in the social fact. As such, it continues to wage the class struggle of consciousness. The history of Anglo-American literature under capitalism is the history of this struggle. It can be discussed at many levels; the remainder of this paper will touch on only a few.

An event of significance is the development of books of poetry, usually dated in English by the publication of Tottel's Miscellany in 1557. If the very invention of the alphabet represents the initial, pre-capitalist, division of labor in language, the first

movement of the language beyond the physical borders of the individual, and if the development of bards leads to a further division into a class of authors and a class of consumers (in a purely tribal society, the poem is the shared language event of the group, the tribe is both author and consumer (Cf. chain-gang and jump-rope songs, two forms reminiscent of tribal authorship)), the arrival of the book greatly accelerates the process. From this moment forward, authors will see increasingly less of their audiences.

Another symptom of this gradual repression is the replacement, by 1750, of subjective styles of italicization and capitalization by "modern conventional" usage.

The rather surprising thing is that so conspicuous and far-reaching a change should have evoked so little contemporary comment. The whole visual effect of a page of type is transformed by it. For us, this entails also a change in psychological response. Men do not ordinarily leave unremarked the swift departure of time-honored custom.

(Bronson, 1958, p. 17)

But if the nature of this change is recognized as repression, then such a conspiracy of silence is not surprising at all. By 1760 one writer, Edward Capell, had gone so far as to discontinue the capitalization of the initial letter of each line of the poem.

Even in the 18th century the contradictions of the commoditization of language result in counter-tendencies. The bourgeois English reader had to participate in the production of the book-as-object, for it was he or she who had to have it bound. Thus individual libraries were bound according to internal aesthetic values, looking quite unlike the hodge-podge of colors and book sizes which typify the modern paperback home library. The sole trace of this counter-tendency in the modern era is the binding style used by encyclopedias and law books, intended to recall the style of that period.

Because of its singular adaptation to capitalist culture, the novel, a distinct subdivision of the poem, is a primary source for any etiology of capitalist reality. Of particular interest are the major forms of response to the modern "crisis" of the novel: the art-novel, the mass market novel and the movies. Before turning to these forms, some preliminary comments should be made concerning the nature of the serialized language consumer and the inherently deformed relationship of the novel to its matrix of origin: the poem.

The two primary types of human relationships are the group and the series. The former is characteristic of tribal societies. Serialization (often termed alienation or atomization) places the individual as a passive cipher into a series of more or less identical units, Whitman's "simple separate person." Its apotheosis is to be found in the modern unemployment line. The function of the commoditized tongue of capitalism is the serialization of the language-user, especially the reader. In its ultimate form, the

consumer of a mass market novel such as Jaws stares numbly at a "blank" page (the page also of the speed-reader) while a story appears to unfold miraculously of its own free will before his or her eyes. The presence of language appears as recessive as the sub-title of a foreign language film.

The work of each poet, each poem, is a response to a determinate coordinate of language and history. Each writer possesses in his or her imagination a subjective conceptualization of this matrix (inevitably partial, inevitably a distortion of the objective matrix which, by definition, is the sum of all poems), which is usually termed the tradition. If the functional structure of the objective matrix is that of a grid of coordinates (in which history plays an increasingly dominant role: see the chart of the "Rise of Historical Consciousness in the Making of Art," Burham, 1973, p. 47), the subjective perception is that of a galaxy, or of a gas in a vacuum in which the work of major writers, important schools and close friends appear as larger molecules and denser regions. The locus of the work to be written is felt as a blind spot in the subjective matrix, a primal lack toward which the writer is driven. This is the essential truth of the cliché that poets write only those poems which they need. Each successful poem abolishes (but only for a time) the primal lack and subtly reorganizes the structure of the matrix. /For a fuller discussion of the role of the matrix in the structure of individual poems, see the articles "Performance" in Shocks magazine and "A note concerning the current status of aRb" in Oculist Witnesses, both forthcoming.<sup>7</sup>

When language is serialized, commoditized, the repressive element deforms the subjective perception of the matrix. The multitudinous qualms, hesitations and self-doubts about this repressive deformation which fill Sterne's Tristram Shandy are increasingly anaesthetized by the rise of capitalism and appear not even to be felt by the modern pulp novelist who can just sit down and hack it out. (When it is felt, the consequence is often the phenomena known as a "writer's block".) For any Rex Stout, the movement of objects, absent the presence of any gestural element, presents no problem. The cumulative and/or continuous present so typical of the temporal environments of the tribal has receded before the possibility of movement-in-time, the capacity for narrative has been greatly enhanced. The underlying precondition of the rise of the novel is precisely this divorce, by repression, from the gravitational force of language in the matrix, an assumption that the free evolution of a narrative art, as such, is possible, but this is an assumption feasible only well within the confines of the commodity fetish of language. Thus the seed of the modern "crisis of the novel" was implanted at the very beginning, its inevitability inherent in the form itself. Instead of "freely" leaving the gravitational pull of language, the novel, like a rocket with insufficient thrust, is doomed to fall back into the atmosphere of its matrix: the peculiar affliction of Tyrone Slothrop is that of the novel itself.

Beginning with the early modernists, many novelists of serious intent at least sense the nature of the contradiction and attempt

to confront it directly. Gertrude Stein attempts to reintroduce the continuous present. Hemingway strives for an art of the sentence as the novel's determining language-unit (Cf. the illuminating discussion of Hemingway, itself conducted well within the commodity fetish of language, in Jameson, 1971, pp. 409-13). Joyce attempts a frontal assault, the reintegration of the novel into language, but his is a pre-Saussurian linguistics, that of etymologies. Such approaches lead eventually to all manifestations of the contemporary art-novel. Of particular note within this vein is the appearance of a subdivision of novelists who write for, and are principally read by, poets, such as Jack Kerouac, Douglas Woolf, Paul Metcalf, Harry Matthews, Kathy Acker and Fielding Dawson.

Another tendency of response to the crisis of the novel is to accept commoditization and to go on to write novels in which the language is all but invisible. While Saul Bellow (or Pearl Buck or John Steinbeck) represents an attempt to achieve this within a serious mode (the novel as a language art continuing to recall its prehistory in the poem, as art), and while a number of other novelists merely stylize their acquiescence (Mailer, Vonnegut, Roth, et al), more typical -- and more revealing -- are those who carry commoditization toward its logical conclusions in the mass-market best-seller, such as Leon Uris, Peter Benchley or Mario Puzo. Mickey Spillane, who simply dictates his novels, carries the disappearance-of-the-word/appearance-of-the-world syndrome to its limit in writing.

But writing need not be the limit. Jettisoning the matrix-factor of language altogether, one tendency of narrative art takes advantage of a new technological development (capitalism's classic defense mechanism) and imposes itself on a new and still unformed matrix. This is the invention of modern cinema, the movies. The transition from novel to film further enables this tendency to modernize its mode of production into a more truly capitalist structure. The lone novelist of 1850, whose product is that of a manufacture-era cottage industry, becomes a century later the modern film company, with a small group of producers who own and control the means of production and a much larger, thoroughly stratified, labor force, from director to "best boy." That the imposition of narrative onto the matrix of film was not necessarily inherent in the formal elements of cinema per se is a consistent theme in the avant-garde or personal film of the past several decades. The very existence of a film such as Vertov's 1928 Man With A Movie Camera, made in the Soviet Union, indicates that it need not have been the case. But such is the nature of capitalist reality -- it is imperialistic.

This listing of tendencies of response within the novel is necessarily brief. Similarly, a history of literary criticism could be written, identifying its origins within the matrix of the poem, its exteriorizing serialization and the resolution of its subsequent crisis through state subsidy by its implantation into the university structure, making it an adjunct of tenure. Such a history would begin with a definition of the function of literary criticism as the separation of the self-consciousness of the activity of the poem from the poem itself. It would locate the



necessity for this separation in the repressive element of the serialization of language as it moves into a capitalist period. It would explore in depth the role of literary criticism in a capitalist society as the creation of a "safe" and "official" matrix through its self-restriction of the object of inquiry to a small number of works identified as the national literature. It would study the optical illusion of literary criticism in the clarity of the essay form, in which the contradictions of its existence such as would be revealed through inarticulations, redundancies and non-sequiturs are subsumed by the tautological form, rendered invisible rather than resolved. Finally it would study the existence of counter-tendencies within literary criticism as well, specifically the anarchic works of literary theory created by poets (e.g., the body of prose left by Charles Olson) and the recent trend in France toward literary criticism as an admitted art form (e.g., Roland Barthes).

Recognition of a capitalist mode of reality passed through the language and imposed on its speakers finally will require a thorough re-evaluation of the history, form and function of the poem. This is a task of almost limitless dimension, for the matrix of the poem is not only the point of origin for the historical phenomena of the novel and literary criticism, it returns to the very social function of the arts, a dual function: for the group, art interiorizes its consciousness by the ordering (one could call it "tuning") of individual sense perceptions; for the individual, be it artist or consumer, art provides him or her with experiences of that dialectical consciousness in which subject and object, self and other, individual and group, unite. Since it is precisely this dialectic consciousness which capitalism seeks to repress through the serialization of the individual (for it is by such consciousness that we know the overdetermination of the objects of our world by the capitalist mode of production), the fine arts in general function as deformed counter-tendencies within the dominant capitalist reality. Such is the history of the poem.

Every major western poetic movement has been an attempt to get beyond the repressing elements of capitalist reality, toward a whole language art, much in the same manner as Stein, Joyce or Hemingway, discussed above. Typically, they have been deformed at the outset by the very condition of existing within the confines of the dominant reality. The dream narratives of surrealism could never hope to go beyond the narrative fetish, as hopelessly trapped within the fetish as "socialist realism." The entire projective tendency, from Pound to Robert Kelly, attempts to rediscover a physical ordering of the language, but posits that order not within the language but within individuals (individualism is the codification of serialized man), operating on the metaphoric equation of a page as scored speech. The recent non-referential formalists, such as Clark Coolidge and Robert Grenier, frontally attack referentiality, but only through negation by specific context. To the extent that negation is determined by the thing negated, they too operate within the referential fetish.

It is the function of dialectical process to not merely ex-

plain the social origin and underlying structure of phenomena, but to ground it in the present social fact of class struggle so as to indicate appropriate courses of action. Quite clearly capitalism has its own mode of reality which is passed through the language and imposed on its speakers. The social function of the language arts, especially the poem, place them in an important position to carry the class struggle for consciousness to the level of consciousness. It is clear that one cannot change language (or consciousness) by fist: the French have only succeeded in limiting their vocabulary. First there must be a change in the mode and control of production of material life.

By recognizing itself as the philosophy of practice in language, poetry can work to search out the preconditions of post-referential language within the existing social fact. This requires (1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle. Such poetry will take as its motto the words of Marx's The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:

The social revolution...cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.

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### Biography

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/note: this essay is dedicated to the English Department of the University of California, Berkeley, whose professors were never able to explain the why of literature, and to the California prisoners, 1972-6, whose subjective perception of time under the

indeterminate sentence led me beyond the borders of my cultural understanding. RS7



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