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Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo

Marjorie Perloff

The “personal” is already a plural condition. Perhaps one feels that it is located somewhere within, somewhere inside the body—in the stomach? the chest? the genitals? the throat? the head? One can look for it and already one is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal.

—LYN HEJINIAN, “The Person and Description”¹

One of the cardinal principles—perhaps *the* cardinal principle—of American Language poetics (as of the related current in England, usually labeled “linguistically innovative poetics”)² has been the dismissal of “voice” as the foundational principle of lyric poetry. In the preface to his anthology *In the American Tree* (1986), Ron Silliman famously declared that Robert Grenier’s “I HATE SPEECH” manifesto, published in the first issue of the San Francisco journal *This* (1971), “announced a breach—and a new moment in American writing”—a rejection of “simple ego psychology in which the poetic text represents not a person, but a persona, the human as unified object. And the reader likewise.”³ From the other coast, Charles Bernstein similarly denounced “voice” as the “privileged

1. Lyn Hejinian, “The Person and Description,” *Poetics Journal* 9 (1991): 170.

2. See, for example, *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK*, ed. Maggie O’Sullivan (London, 1996).

3. Ron Silliman, “Language, Realism, Poetry,” in *In the American Tree*, ed. Silliman (Orono, Maine, 1986), pp. xv, xix.

structure in the organization and interpretation of poems.”⁴ And in his early essay “Stray Straws and Straw Men,” Silliman is Bernstein’s Exhibit A for a constructivist poetry, a poetry that undermines the “natural look,” with its “personal subject matter & a flowing syntax.”⁵ “Ron Silliman,” Bernstein writes, “has consistently written a poetry of visible borders: a poetry of shape,” one that “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” (“SS,” pp. 40–41). And the essay goes on to unmask Official Verse Culture, with its “sanctification” of “authenticity,” “artlessness,” “spontaneity,” and claim for *self-presence*, the notion, widely accepted in the poetry of the 1960s, that “the experience is present to me” (“SS,” pp. 41, 42).⁶

Although Bernstein doesn’t explicitly say so, the critique of voice, self-presence, and authenticity, put forward in *Content’s Dream*, as well as in such related texts as Silliman’s own *The New Sentence* (1987) or Steve McCaffery’s *North of Intention* (1986),⁷ must be understood as part of the

4. Charles Bernstein, “An Interview with Tom Beckett,” *Content’s Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles, 1986), p. 408.

5. Bernstein, “Stray Straws and Straw Men,” *Content’s Dream*, p. 41; hereafter abbreviated “SS.”

6. Compare the Beckett interview, where Bernstein remarks, “Voice . . . is inextricably tied up with the organizing of the poem along psychological parameters,” “a self-constituting project.” “To try to unify the style of work around this notion of self is to take the writing to be not only reductively autobiographical in trying to define the *sound* of me but also to accept that the creation of a persona is somehow central to writing poetry.” And, again, “It’s a mistake, I think, to posit the self as the primary organizing feature of writing” (Bernstein, “An Interview with Tom Beckett,” pp. 407, 408).

7. See, for example, Steve McCaffery, “Nothing Is Forgotten but the Talk of How to Talk: An Interview by Andrew Payne” (1984), *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973–1986* (New York, 1986), pp. 111–12, where McCaffery dismisses early experiments in sound poetry as bedeviled by the “dominant mythology of Origin: a privileging of the pre-linguistic, child-sound, the Rousseauist dream of immediate-intuitive communication, all of which tended to a reinscription of a supposed pre-symbolic order in a present, self-authenticating instant.” And compare Michael Davidson, “‘Hey Man, My Wave!’: The Authority of Private Language,” *Poetics Journal* 6 (1986): 33–45. “The ideal of subjectivity itself,” writes Davidson,

is not so much the source as the product of specific sociohistorical structures. The subject upon which the lyric impulse is based, rather than being able to generate its own language of the heart, is also constituted within a world of public discourse. The

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larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject, a critique that became prominent in the late sixties and reached its height in the U.S. a decade or so later when the Language movement was coming into its own. It was Roland Barthes, after all, who insisted, in “The Death of the Author” (1968), that writing, far from being the simple and direct expression of interiority, is “the destruction of every voice, every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.” “Linguistically,” Barthes declared, “the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person.’” And he famously concludes:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God). . . . The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. . . . The writer can only imitate a gesture that is *always anterior, never original*. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others. . . . Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.⁸

Here Barthes anticipates Foucault’s equally famous pronouncement, in “What Is an Author?” (1969), that “the writing of our day has freed itself from the necessity of ‘expression.’”⁹ In Foucault’s words:

Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. Thus, the essential basis

lyric “I” emerges as a positional relation. Its subjectivity is made possible by a linguistic and ultimately social structure in which “I” speaks. [P. 41]

For comparable statements by women poets, see the section “Poetics and Exposition” in *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*, ed. Mary Margaret Sloan (Jersey City, N.J., 1998), pp. 561–714. Rosmarie Waldrop, for example, dismisses the romantic notion that “the poem is an epiphany inside the poet’s mind and then ‘expressed’ by choosing the right words.” Rather, “the poem is not ‘expression,’ but a cognitive process that, to some extent, changes me” (Rosmarie Waldrop, “Thinking of Follows,” pp. 609, 610).

8. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1968), *Image, Music, Text* trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York, 1968), pp. 142, 145, 146–47; my emphasis. And compare Barthes, “From Speech to Writing” (1974), *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York, 1985), pp. 3–7.

9. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard, ed. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), p. 116; hereafter abbreviated “WIA.”

of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears. ["WIA," p. 138]

The author is now replaced by the "author-function"—the function of a particular discourse—and the pressing questions about a given text become, not "what has [the author] revealed of his most profound self in his language?" but "where does [this discourse] come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?" ("WIA," p. 138).

"What matter who's speaking?" ("WIA," p. 138). Beckett's question, as recharged and transmitted by Foucault, was to be historicized, along Marxist and specifically Althusserian lines, by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Whereas Barthes, Foucault, and the Derrida of *Writing and Difference* were essentially talking about how to read, how, that is, to construct an existing text without taking its author's intentions as normative, Jameson takes the death of the author, or, rather, the death of the subject, quite literally, that death being no more than one of the symptoms of the social transformations produced by late global capitalism. "The very concept of expression," Jameson posits, "presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside" that characterizes great modernist artworks like Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* or Edward Munch's *The Scream*.¹⁰ Postmodernism no longer recognizes such "depth models" as inside/outside, essence/appearance, latent/manifest, authenticity/inauthenticity, signifier/signified, or depth/surface.

The "alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation," and indeed by "the 'death' of the subject itself—the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" (*P*, pp. 14–15). Coupled with that end is the end of a "unique style, along with the accompanying collective ideals of an artistic or political vanguard or avant-garde." The result is the now-axiomatic "waning of affect" that manifests itself in an ability to produce satire or even parody, the latter giving way to "blank parody" or pastiche. "As for expression," writes Jameson, "the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (*P*, p. 15).

10. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C., 1991), p. 11; hereafter abbreviated *P*. Later Jameson cites Bob Perelman's "China" as an instance of the schizophrenia or "breakdown in the signifying chain" that characterizes postmodernism (*P*, p. 27; see pp. 28–29). For Perelman's own response to this reading, see his *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), pp. 63–69. But for us the issue is less whether Jameson does or does not give an adequate reading of "China," but whether the characterization of postmodernism holds up.

In his first formulation of this “new depthlessness” or “waning of affect” (1984),¹¹ Jameson voiced some regret over the passing of modernism. But by 1990 (the date of “Conclusion: Secondary Elaborations” to *Postmodernism*), he seems to find the passing of the modernist giants—Picasso, Kafka, Proust, Frank Lloyd Wright—the occasion of at least some satisfaction:

If the poststructuralist motif of the “death of the subject” means anything socially, it signals the end of the entrepreneurial and inner-directed individualism, with its “charisma” and its accompanying categorical panoply of quaint romantic values such as that of the “genius” in the first place. Seen thus, the extinction of the “great moderns” is not necessarily an occasion for pathos. Our social order is richer in information and more literate, and socially, at least, more “democratic” in the sense of the universalization of wage labor. . . . This new order no longer needs prophets and seers of the high modernist and charismatic type. . . . Such figures no longer hold any charm or magic for the subjects of a corporate, collectivized, postindividualistic age; in that case, goodbye to them without regrets, as Brecht might have put it: *woe to the country that needs geniuses, prophets, Great Writers, or demiurges*. [P, p. 306; my emphasis]

I cite this passage at some length because its argument has been so thoroughly internalized in our own “advanced” discourses about the place of the aesthetic in our culture. The demise of the transcendental ego, of the authentic self, of the poet as lonely genius, of a unique artistic style: these, as we have seen, are now taken as something of a given. In their group manifesto “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry” (1988), for example, Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten concur that “our work denies the centrality of the individual artist. . . . The self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing.”¹² And, given the tedious and unreflective claim for the unique insight and individual vision that has characterized so large a portion of mainstream poetry, the case for an “alternative” poetics remains compelling.

At the same time, now that the exploratory poetics associated with the Language movement are more than twenty years old, Jameson’s formulations (and related theories of the postmodern) have lost much of their edge. For, even if we set aside the work of mainstream poets like the American laureates Robert Pinsky and Robert Hass, Mark Strand and Rita Dove, even if we restrict ourselves to the poets of the counterculture

11. See Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July–Aug. 1984): 53–92.

12. Silliman et al., “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto,” *Social Text*, nos. 19–20 (Fall 1988): 264.

represented in, say, Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris's new *Poems for the Millennium*,¹³ differences among the various poets now strike us as more significant than similarities or group labels. Such counters as asyntacticality or the disappearance of the referent, or even the materiality of the sign cannot alter the simple fact that we can easily tell a Charles Bernstein poem from one by Steve McCaffery, a Tom Raworth sequence from one by Allen Fisher, a Maggie O'Sullivan "verbovisivocal" text from one by Susan Howe. More important: the breakdown of the high/low distinction, accepted as a cornerstone of postmodernism by the theorists of the seventies and eighties, is coming under increasing suspicion as common sense tells us that all artworks are not, after all, equally valuable (whatever *valuable* means), and that when, for example, Frank Sinatra is called, as he has been in the wake of his recent death, one of the great artists of the century, this statement is not really equivalent to the proposition that John Cage is one of the great artists of the century. For one thing, the two assertions call for different speakers. For another, they posit different contexts. The word *great*, in any case, means something different in the two cases, as does the word *artist*. Even "one of" is unstable: Sinatra fans were comparing their idol not only to other "great" singers and movie stars but to tycoons of the American record industry, those savvy entrepreneurs who know how to market a given label. In the case of Cage, on the other hand, "one of" would refer to the international avant-garde market—the Hörspiele heard on German radio as well as the Zen art of Japan.

Then, too, contemporary poetics has not satisfactorily resolved the relation of what Jameson calls the "new depthlessness" to the "genius" position now occupied by those evidently deep (read complex, difficult) theorists, whose word is all but law. Indeed, even as Jameson rejects the image of the "great demiurges and prophets" like "Proust in his cork-lined room" or the "'tragic,' uniquely doomed Kafka" (*P*, p. 305), he cites, on page after page, names like Adorno and Althusser, Freud and Lacan, Hegel and Nietzsche, Jean-François Lyotard and Ernesto Laclau, not to mention the book's presiding deity, who is, of course, Karl Marx. If genius theory is passé, if there is no such thing as unique style or authorial presence, why are these names so sacred? If Foucault has pronounced so definitively on the death of the author, why are we always invoking the name of the author Foucault? Again, if in the current climate we dare not claim canonical status for Beckett or Brecht, why does Walter Benjamin enjoy that status so readily?

In a recent essay for Bernstein's collection *Close Listening* (1998), Silliman speculates on this phenomenon. Silliman begins by restating his opposition to "the poem as confession of lived personal experience, the

13. See *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1995, 1998).

(mostly) free verse presentation of sincerity and authenticity that for several decades has been a staple of most of the creative writing programs in the United States.”¹⁴ But, in reevaluating what he calls Barthes’s “ritual slaying of the author” (“WS,” p. 364), Silliman wonders whether Barthes’s theory of text construction hasn’t gone too far. The insistence, in “The Death of the Author,” that “the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted,” is finally unsatisfactory: “The idealized, absent author of the New Critical canon has here been replaced by an equally idealized, absent reader. All that remains are the reports of other readers—call them critics—whose texts endlessly read textuality itself, whose claim to authority lies precisely in the self-knowledge of their texts as infinitely deferred, deferring, acts” (“WS,” p. 365).

And where do these acts take place? Where else but in the university? As Silliman speculates:

Perhaps it should not be a surprise that while postmodernism in the arts has been conducted largely, although not exclusively, outside of the academy, the postmodern debate has been largely conducted between different schools of professors who agree only that they too dislike it. Thus the characteristic strategy of the ambitious critic and anxious graduate student alike is not the opening of the canons, but rather the demonstration of a critical move upon some text(s) within the already established ensemble of official canons. . . . Once incorporated into an institutional canon, the text becomes little more than a ventriloquist’s dummy through which a babel of critical voices contend. [“WS,” pp. 365, 368]

Barthes could not, of course, have foreseen that the privilege he accorded the reader (“We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning”) would so easily turn into the form of ventriloquism Silliman describes. But, as those of us in the academy know only too well, this is precisely what has happened. “We know now” (“On sait maintenant”): we who are critics can practice our virtuosity on this or that poem which is consequently accorded secondary status. Hence the elevated status of Benjamin or Deleuze vis-à-vis Beckett or Kafka.

What matter who’s speaking? Perhaps it is time to reconsider the role of the subject in lyric poetry. “The relation between agency and identity,” writes Silliman, “must be understood as interactive, fluid, negotiable” (“WS,” p. 371). It is a “relation between the poet, a real person with ‘history, biography, psychology,’ and the reader, no less real, no less encum-

14. Silliman, “Who Speaks: Ventriloquism and the Self in the Poetry Reading,” in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Bernstein (New York, 1998), p. 362; hereafter abbreviated “WS.”

bered by all this baggage. In poetry, the self is a relation between writer and reader that is triggered by what [Roman] Jakobson called contact, the power of presence" ("WS," p. 373).

I find it interesting that Silliman, once an outspoken detractor of formalism, here invokes the name of the great Russian formalist critic. A similar shift may be noted in Bernstein's work. In the mordantly funny essay "The Revenge of the Poet-Critic" (1998), Bernstein examines the issues posed by the poetics of cultural construction. "In the 1990s," he remarks,

the problems of group affiliation (the neolyric "we") pose as much a problem for poetry as do assertions of the Individual Voice. If poems can't speak directly for an author, neither can they speak directly for a group. . . . Each poem speaks not only many voices but also many groups and poetry can investigate the construction of these provisional entities in and through and by language.

If individual identity is a false front, group identity is a false fort.¹⁵

And, in the related essay "What's Art Got to Do with It?" Bernstein gives a devastating critique of the current critical orthodoxy that treats literature as no more than "symptom" or "example," even as the theorist is taken to be above and beyond the fray. Isn't it possible, asks Bernstein, that Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* is itself a "commodity whose status is determined by its role in the professional habitat to which he belongs?" Or, again, "Is Fredric Jameson's writing on postmodernism a symptom of postindustrial capitalism?" "Behind every successful artist," Bernstein declares, "is a new historian who says it's all just a symptom. Behind every successful new historian is an artist who says you forgot to mention my work—and, boy, is it symptomatic!"¹⁶

Of course, as Bernstein would be the first to insist, there's no going back to earlier models. The workshop term *voice*, for example, a term that implies, quite inaccurately, that *speech* is primary and prior to writing and that hence a poem is simply the outward sign of a spoken self-presence (as in the ubiquitous cliché, "She's really found her voice") is not adequate. Neither is the fuzzy term *style*, a term now thoroughly co-opted by the media and commodified in such titles as "Life and Style" (a daily section of the *Los Angeles Times*).

Perhaps a more accurate term to refer to the mark of difference that

15. Bernstein, "The Revenge of the Poet-Critic, or, The Parts Are Greater Than the Sum of the Whole," *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 8–9.

16. Bernstein, "What's Art Got to Do with It? The Status of the Subject of the Humanities in an Age of Cultural Studies," *My Way*, pp. 45, 48.

separates one identity from another, no matter how fully the two share a particular group aesthetic, is the word *signature*. From 1580, a signature, from the Latin *signare*, to sign or mark, is “the name (or special mark) of a person written with his or her own hand as an authentication of some document or writing.” “The fatal signature,” we read in Robert Southey’s “All for Love” (1829), “appear’d / To all the multitude, / Distinct as when the accursed pen / Had traced it with fresh blood.” A subsidiary meaning (1613) of *signature*, now obsolete, was “a distinctive mark, a peculiarity in form or colouring, etc., on a plant or other natural object, formerly supposed to be an indication of its qualities, especially for medicinal purposes.” A signature thus came to mean “a distinguishing mark of any kind”: in 1626, Lancelot Andrewes wrote in one of his sermons, “The saviour . . . taking on Him ‘Abraham’s seed’ must withal take on Him the signature of Abraham’s seed, and be . . . circumcised.” And in his translation of the *Odyssey* (1725) Pope writes, “Vulgar parents cannot stamp their race / With signatures of such majestic grace.” In the seventeenth century (this meaning is now obsolete), *signature* was used to designate “a naevus, or birth-mark.”¹⁷

A second category of definitions comes from the discourse of printing: a *signature*, let’s recall, is “a letter or figure, a set or combination of letters or figures, etc., placed by the printer at the foot of the first page (and frequently on one or more of the succeeding pages) of every sheet in a book, for the purpose of showing the order in which these are to be placed or bound.” And, thirdly, there is the musical designation of signature; from 1806 on, it has meant “a sign, or set of signs, placed at the beginning of a piece of music, immediately after the clef, to indicate its key or time.”¹⁸

The common thread of all three of the above categories is that of the signature as identifying mark. As such, it is not surprising that, like its cognate term, *author*, the word *signature* became suspect in poststructuralist theory. In *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), Foucault writes movingly of signatures as the key element in the system of similitudes that dominated the premodern world. As “the visible mark of invisible analogies,” the signature was, for centuries, the external sign of a hidden but present interiority, and the world was “read” as a large open book, whose signs, characters, numbers, symbols, and hieroglyphs demanded interpretation. “To find the law of signs,” as Foucault famously puts it, “is to discover things.”¹⁹

Les Mots et les choses traces the historical dissolution of this Renais-

17. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “signature.”

18. *Ibid.*

19. Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966), pp. 41, 44; my translation. Ironically, the English translation bears the title *The Order of Things*, which eliminates Foucault’s own stress on the relation of word to thing as the important one.

sance episteme, a dissolution considered from a hermeneutic perspective by Derrida in “Signature Event Context” (1972). “A written sign,” writes Derrida, “is a mark that subsists, one which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription and which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it.”²⁰ But since the written sign inevitably breaks with its context, “with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription,” “the absolute singularity of signature as event” can never fully occur (“SEC,” pp. 9, 20). Thus writing “is not the site, ‘in the last instance,’ of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth” (“SEC,” p. 21).

From a hermeneutic perspective, this is no doubt the case. But even Derrida, posing the question, “Are there signatures?” responds, “Yes, of course, every day. Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world” (“SEC,” p. 20). And he ends his essay with the “counterfeit” signature “J. Derrida” (“SEC,” p. 21). The implication is that, however conscious we must be of the basic instability of a given signature, *in practice* we do take signatures seriously as markers of a particular individual, a cultural practice, a historical period, a national formation, a convention, and so on. Indeed, if our purpose is to understand specific writing practices, individual as well as generic, we can hardly avoid noting their individual stamp or mark of authorship. The new Bilbao-Guggenheim Museum, for example, may bear witness to any number of postmodern architectural traits (and some modernist ones as well: witness the building’s Frank Lloyd Wright allusions), but its indelible signature is that of its highly individual architect, Frank Gehry.

This brings me back to the question of the lyric subject in the ostensibly deauthorized work of the Language poets. In what follows, I want to look at signatures in two poetic texts, both of them written by what are nominally Language poets and both charting, in very specific ways, the geography of childhood. The first is Ron Silliman’s own “Albany,” the second, Susan Howe’s *Frame Structures*.

“Signatures of all things I am here to read”

“Albany” is a long prose paragraph made up of one hundred “new sentences,” to use Silliman’s own term, defined in a now well-known (and hotly debated) essay by that name. The “new sentence” is conceived as an independent unit, neither causally nor temporally related to the sentences that precede and follow it. Like a line in poetry, its length is operative,

20. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill., 1988), p. 9; hereafter abbreviated “SEC.”

and its meaning depends on the larger paragraph as organizing system.²¹ Here, for example, are the first twenty sentences of "Albany":

If the function of writing is to "express the world." My father withheld child support, forcing my mother to live with her parents, my brother and I to be raised together in a small room. Grandfather called them niggers. I can't afford an automobile. Far across the calm bay stood a complex of long yellow buildings, a prison. A line is the distance between. They circled the seafood restaurant, singing "We shall not be moved." My turn to cook. It was hard to adjust my sleeping to those hours when the sun was up. The event was nothing like their report of it. How concerned was I over her failure to have orgasms? Mondale's speech was drowned by jeers. Ye wretched. She introduces herself as a rape survivor. Yet his best friend was Hispanic. I decided not to escape to Canada. Revenue enhancement. Competition and spectacle, kinds of drugs. If it demonstrates form some people won't read it. Television unifies conversation.

And here the last twenty:

Client populations (cross the tundra). Off the books. The whole neighborhood is empty in the daytime. Children form lines at the end of each recess. Eminent domain. Rotating chair. The history of Poland is 90 seconds. Flaming pintos. There is no such place as the economy, the self. That bird demonstrates the sky. Our home, we were told, had been broken, but who were these people we lived with? Clubbed in the stomach, she miscarried. There were bayonets on campus, cows in India, people shoplifting books. I just want to make it to lunch time. Uncritical of nationalist movements in the Third World. Letting the dishes sit for a week. Macho culture of convicts. With a shotgun and "in defense" the officer shot him in the face. Here, for a moment, we are joined. The want-ads lie strewn on the table.²²

As in his long poems *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*, both written a few years earlier, "Albany" relies on parataxis, dislocation, and ellipsis (the very first sentence, for example, is a conditional clause whose result clause is missing), as well as pun, paragram, and sound play to construct its larger paragraph unit. But it is not just a matter of missing pieces. The poet also avoids conventional "expressivity" by refusing to present us with a consistent "I," not specifying, for that matter, who the subject of a given sentence might be. Who, for example, says, "I just want to make it to

21. See Silliman, "The New Sentence," *The New Sentence* (New York, 1987), pp. 63–93, and compare Perelman, "Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice," *The Marginalization of Poetry*, pp. 59–78.

22. Silliman, "Albany," *ABC* (Berkeley, 1983), n.p.

lunch time”? Or, “Talking so much is oppressive”? Who believes that “music is essential,” and, by the way, essential to what? Whose “best friend was Hispanic”? And so on.

At the same time—and this has always been a Silliman trademark—indeterminacy of agent and referent does not preclude an obsessive attention to particular “realistic” detail. Despite repeated time and space shifts, the world of Albany, California, is wholly recognizable. It is, to begin with, not the Bay Area of the affluent—the Marin County suburbanites, Russian Hill aesthetes, or Berkeley middle-class go-getters. The working-class motif is immediately established with the reference to “my father withheld child support, forcing my mother to live with her parents, my brother and I to be raised together in a small room.” And this is the white working class: “Grandfather called them niggers.” Later, when the narrator is living in a part of San Francisco where, on the contrary, many ethnicities are represented, we read that “they speak in Farsi at the corner store.” The poet is a political activist: he participates in demonstrations and teach-ins, is briefly jailed, avoids the draft, and so on. There are many explanations of everyday things the activist must deal with: “The cops wear shields that serve as masks.” But the paragraph is also filled with references to sexual love: couplings and uncouplings, rape, miscarriage, and abortion. And, finally, there is the motif of poetry: “If it demonstrates form they can’t read it.” And readings: “It’s not easy if your audience doesn’t identify as readers.” Writing poetry is always a subtext but one makes one’s living elsewhere: “The want-ads,” as the last sentence reminds us, “lie strewn on the table.”

“Silliman’s work,” observes Jed Rasula, “may be read as a grand refusal of the chronic strategies of authorial domination.”²³ Here Rasula echoes Silliman’s own early Language manifestos, with their emphasis on the avoidance of what Olson called the “lyrical interference of the individual as ego,” the refusal to create a consistent or controlling self whose construction of events as of verbal forms controls the material in question.²⁴ The “realism” of “Albany,” Rasula would no doubt argue, is properly understood, not as personal expression, but as an elaborate network of signifiers in which conflicting vocalizations and linguistic registers come into play.

But must it be either/or? And is it really the case that Silliman eschews “authorial domination”? I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with such formulations. For who, after all, controls the specific language operations in the text before us? There is, to begin with, not the slightest doubt that “Albany” is a man’s poem, a man aware of the sexual needs

23. Jed Rasula, “Ron Silliman,” *Contemporary Poets*, ed. Thomas Riggs, 6th ed. (Detroit, 1996), p. 1009.

24. Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” *Collected Prose of Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley, 1997), p. 247.

and difficulties of the women in his life but centrally caught up in the political: the need for demonstrations, the abuses of the cops, the “bayonets on campus,” the question of “nationalist movements in the Third World.” “How concerned was I,” we read in sentence 11, “over her failure to have orgasms?” However much—and the question may have been posed to the narrator by a friend, a relative, a physician, or by himself—the very next sentence, “Mondale’s speech was drowned by jeers,” places the question about orgasms in ironic perspective. Even such seemingly neutral statements as “my turn to cook” identify “Albany” as the narrative of a young man who has consciously rejected the traditional male role; in his mother’s household, after all, such a statement would have been absurd, given the traditional division of labor.

The signature of “Albany” is a “normal” declarative sentence (“I can’t afford an automobile”) or part of a sentence (“To own a basement,” “Died in action”), sometimes commonsensical, sometimes aphoristic, sometimes an item in a newspaper or on television. In their curious collisions, these “casual” sentences point to an author who is matter-of-fact, streetwise, and largely self-educated; his is the discourse of a working-class man (as even the first name Ron rather than Ronald suggests) who has slowly and painfully learned the craft of poetry, a man who’s been around and has had to put up with quite a bit, beginning with his father’s withholding of child support. Pain, violence, and injustice are the facts of his life; sentence after sentence refers to murders, shoot-outs, abortions, riots, asbestos poisoning, and the like. And even at the trivial level difficulty dominates: “It was hard to adjust my sleeping to those hours when the sun was up.” “Becoming prepared to live with less space.” “I used my grant to fix my teeth.” And so on. Yet Silliman’s characteristic formulations are by no means gloomy; on the contrary, his “voice” emerges as sprightly, engaged, curious, fun-loving, energetic, a voice that loves the wordplay of “they call their clubs batons. They call their committees clubs.” Or, “Eminent domain. Rotating chair.” Or, “There were bayonets on campus, cows in India, people shoplifting books. I just want to make it to lunch time.”

No individual signature? Let’s compare the prose of “Albany” to the following extracts:

- 1) How was I to know that the woman, seated next to me on the bus, would, when the bus lurched, just appear to lose her balance, and, as if to keep herself from swaying, would take hold of my arm with her hand so that pressing me between her finger and thumb she pinched my arm. Though I believed (looking at her sideways, and seeing only that her lips were parted slightly, with her snout breathing softly) that during the two to three minutes in which this pain lasted, she was saying (or at least I imagined so from the length of time that she held on to my arm before releasing me) *I wish that I could make you yelp just once.*

2) *A* and *Not-A* are the same.

My dog does not know me.

Violins, like dreams, are suspect.

I come from Kolophon, or perhaps some small island.

The strait has frozen, and people are walking—a few skating—
across it.

On the crescent beach, a drowned deer.

A woman with one hand, her thighs around your neck.

The world is all that is displaced.

Apples in a stall at the street corner by the Bahnhof, pale yellow to
blackish red.

Memory does not speak.

Shortness of breath, accompanied by tinnitus.

3) A man is standing in front of a window. In possession of what he sees. A person becomes a lens on a room inside. Then to walk into the room on sequent occasions. The lights go down on the buildings outside. The window is off of the kitchen, the room is filled with people. Smoke coming out of the cracks. What can he have. All words resolve this matter like a huge weight balancing on a single point. That point is in motion, verging from one word to the next. A cyclone covers the surface of the ceiling with wavering lines. The room fills in with fragments of their talk. But a window is an opening to the outside. He is contradicted in his rooms, imagining a better place to live.

All three of these passages come from poetic works by San Francisco poets associated with the Language movement: they are, respectively, Leslie Scalapino's "hmmmm" from *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is*, Michael Palmer's "Autobiography" in *At Passages*, and Barrett Watten's "City Fields" in *Frame (1971–1990)*.²⁵ All three poets would insist, I think, that theirs is not an "expressivist" poetry, that, in Palmer's words, "He regards the self

25. Leslie Scalapino, "hmmmm," *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is* (San Francisco, 1982), p. 21; Michael Palmer, "Autobiography," *At Passages* (New York, 1995), p. 84; and Barrett Watten, "City Fields" (1978), *Frame (1971–1990)* (Los Angeles, 1997), p. 137.

as just another sign.”²⁶ And it is true that, read against, say, a lyric by Mark Strand or Louise Gluck, there is no doubt that Scalapino, Palmer, and Watten are trying, in the words of Jasper Johns, to “do something else to it,”²⁷ true that they have no interest in the closural, first-person metaphoric model of mainstream poetry.

But to group these texts as Language poems tells us very little. Scalapino’s nine-line, rectangular print block, written in complete sentences but with internal spacing that emphasizes its lineation has a perfectly consistent angle of vision, quite unlike Silliman’s collage-prose. It is part of a longer sequence on the uncanny and terrifying substrate of ordinary life. Scalapino’s empiricist, “flat” narrative purports merely to describe what happened, but what did? The scene, as so often in Silliman,²⁸ is on a bus; the “I” is sitting next to an unknown woman. When the bus lurches, this woman, evidently to keep her balance, grabs the poet’s arm and pinches it. The incident couldn’t be more trivial, but the narrator is convinced that the woman is pinching her on purpose, that somehow she is telling herself, “*I wish that I could make you yelp just once.*” There is no evidence for this malice, but no evidence against it either; we only know that the woman’s “lips were parted slightly, with her snout breathing softly,” the word *snout* for *nose* connoting a malignant, animal quality. But of course the real focus of this paragraph is not on the stranger but on the “I,” who reads these sinister motives into the most ordinary of incidents. Somehow—how?—her mind’s not right, or is it that her suspicion is merely the emblem of the larger, depersonalized, tooth-and-claw survival of the fittest that characterizes the post-modern metropolis?

Scalapino’s prose, in any case, far from being disjointed like Silliman’s, moves inexorably from beginning to end, from the question, “How was I to know” to the projected words of the stranger presented in italics. Silliman would never describe a woman as having a snout; indeed, his eyes would barely take in her person and quickly, impatiently, move on to something else—a memory, perhaps, of what *he* did with *her*, or a description of a boarding house, or an amusing pun that occurs to him. His jaunty utterances, upbeat despite the constant difficulties he faces, are quite unlike the just barely controlled hysteria that animates “hmmmm.”

Michael Palmer’s lineated poem is called “Autobiography,” but the

26. Palmer, “Autobiography,” p. 84.

27. Jasper Johns, “Sketchbook Notes, 1963–64,” *Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York, 1996), p. 54. Johns’s famous entry reads:

Take an object
Do something to it
Do something else to it
" " " " "

28. In *Under Albany*, Silliman notes that both “Sitting Up, Standing, Taking Steps” and “The Chinese Notebook” were written entirely on Golden Gate transit. See *Under Albany*, forthcoming in volume 29 of *Contemporary Authors*; ms. p. 3 n. 4.

poet's tone is more impersonal than either Silliman's or Scalapino's. His short sentences, separated by large areas of white space, are enigmatic and parabolic, his images equivocal. Some of his aphorisms—"A and *not-A* are the same"; "The world is all that is displaced"—allude to Wittgenstein, the latter a nice twist on "the world is all that is the case."²⁹ Some sentences contain literary allusions: "My dog does not know me," for example, inverts Gertrude Stein's, "I am I because my little dog knows me."³⁰ In this context, "My dog does not know me" is equivalent to saying "I am nothing." "All clocks are clouds" brings to mind a Magritte painting; and such lines as "winter roses are invisible" and "late ice sometimes sings" are written under the sign of André Breton's *Nadja* and related surrealist dreamworks. Unlike either Silliman or Scalapino, both of them insistently urban poets, Palmer is given to references to "roses" and "ice," to "the crescent beach, a drowned deer." And these nature images are underscored by references to foreign (usually European) locales, as in "apples in a stall at the street corner by the Bahnhof, pale yellow to blackish red"). One thinks here of Apollinaire's "Zone" or Cendrars's "Panama, or My Seven Uncles."

Altogether, Palmer's imagination is more visual and literary than Silliman's, his memories more hallucinatory and dreamlike. His is the anxiety, not of the malignant, faceless crowd, as in Scalapino's piece, but of the empty room: "Violins, like dreams, are suspect." "There is," David Levi Strauss has remarked,

a quite identifiable first person running through [Palmer's] books. It is usually male, neurasthenic, doubtful, by turns cheerful and morose: a reluctant survivor. If it had a visible companion, the other might be called Didi or Clov or Camier. This first person is trepidatious and apologetic, constantly undercutting its own authority.³¹

In "Autobiography," not surprisingly, Silliman's sturdy resilience gives way to "shortness of breath, accompanied by tinnitus." And although, like Silliman, Palmer writes a poetry of parataxis, his is a juxtapositioning of poetic and philosophical fragments rather than the phenomenology of everyday life characteristic of Silliman.

Yet another kind of psychic drive can be found in Barrett Watten's prose poem, again part of a longer sequence. Unlike Silliman, Scalapino,

29. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (1921; New York, 1961), §1.1.

30. Gertrude Stein, "What Are Master-Pieces," *Writings, 1932-1946* (New York, 1998), p. 355. Stein repeated this sentence frequently; see, for example, *Geographical History of America*, in *Writings*, p. 424.

31. David Levi Strauss, "Aporia and Amnesia," review of *At Passages*, by Palmer, *The Nation*, 23 Dec. 1996, p. 27.

and Palmer, Watten uses the third person, but his narrator, who becomes “a lens on a room inside,” functions as a kind of Jamesian register, through whom all “events” and items perceived are filtered. It is he who is “in possession of what he sees,” first from outside the room and then from inside, he who feels cut off from the “fragments of their talk.” Yet he is more confident than Palmer’s self-critical “I,” more assertive about “imagining a better place to live.” Anxiety, for Watten, is socially constructed and hence to be overcome by social change: “All words resolve this matter like a huge weight balancing on a single point.” For the moment, however, there is no escape: “A cyclone covers the surface of the ceiling with wavering lines.”

In Watten’s account of displacement and possible reconnection, each sentence leads to the next. If Silliman were writing this, “The window is off the kitchen” would be followed by a sentence like “net income is down 13%” or “they photograph Habermas to hide the hairlip.”³² Watten’s prose is more chaste, consecutive, linear; his vocabulary less exuberant and varied. And even though his narrator never speaks in his own person, a voice—measured yet urgent, direct yet highly “educated”—comes through. Again, no one would mistake this passage for a work by Silliman.

The poet’s naevus or birthmark, it would seem, is not so easily eradicated. It is interesting that when, in 1997, Gale Research invited Silliman to contribute an autobiographical essay to their *Contemporary Authors* series, he used the sentences of “Albany” “to tell me what to write, where to focus, that moment in the essay. The whole premise of ‘Albany’ (or at least a premise) was to focus on things that were both personal and political, so when Gale called, it seemed like the right place to begin. *That poem always has been my autobiography, so to speak.*”³³ The resultant text, in which each of the one hundred sentences is printed in boldface, followed by a paragraph of varying length, is called *Under Albany*—under, no doubt, because the poet now tries to get inside, behind, and under his earlier statements so as to make some sense of their psychological and social trajectory.³⁴

Not infrequently, the *under* entry contradicts or qualifies the original

32. Silliman, “Albany,” n.p.

33. Silliman, letter to the author, 10 Jan. 1998; my emphasis.

34. It would be interesting to compare Silliman’s to a number of other Language poets’ autobiographical memoirs written for the Gale series, especially Bernstein’s “An Autobiographical Interview Conducted by Loss Pequeño Glazier,” *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*, 24 vols. to date (Detroit, 1997), 24:31–50; rpt. in Bernstein, *My Way*, pp. 229–52. For Bernstein, autobiography and poetry remain separate entities, his metier being the hybridization of the poetic/theoretical rather than the poetic/autobiographical.

sentence. For example (sentence 3):

Grandfather called them niggers.

So that I was surprised at how many elderly African American men, all, like my grandfather, members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) came to his funeral.³⁵

In the context of “Albany,” the first sentence is taken at face value. Followed as it is in the original poem by “I can’t afford an automobile,” it gives us a sense of the bleak deprivation and petty racism of white working-class Albany, California. But in *Under Albany* the meaning of what is now a title shifts; perhaps, the reader here surmises, “calling them niggers” wasn’t equivalent to simple racism, for, as veterans of World War I, black and white men may well have had interacted more fully than have their grandsons.

I have discussed elsewhere the complex relationship of title to paragraph in *Under Albany*,³⁶ a text that is deeply moving in its account of the poet’s empty childhood—a childhood that paradoxically paves the way for the remarkable resilience and optimism of Silliman’s maturity:

I look forward to old age with some excitement.

Sixteen years later, I am writing from my room 218 in the Motel Six of Porterville, in the Sierra foothills north of Bakersfield. My nephew, Stephen Matthew Silliman is just four days old. Allen Ginsberg has been dead for 13 days. Their worlds never crossed, just as mine never crossed Gertrude Stein’s. But I know people who have slept with people who have slept with people who slept with Walt Whitman. At 94, Carl Rakosi’s mind clear as a bell. Others at 24, hopelessly muddied and muddled. Once, walking on the beach at Stinson with Rae Armantrout during our student days at Berkeley, I knelt to pick up a beautifully pocked smooth gray stone (I still have it). She asked me what I was doing. “Looking for the good ones,” I replied.³⁷

In the context of Silliman’s account of his day-to-day difficulties and trauma, the upbeat ending of this paragraph comes as a real surprise. His is a complex and engaging autobiography, but then “Albany,” the prior text that supposedly exhibits what Jameson calls the “waning of affect,” was always already autobiographical.

35. Silliman, *Under Albany*, p. 3.

36. See Marjorie Perloff, “The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer: Ron Silliman and the Alphabet,” *Quarry West* 34 (1998): 167–81. The present discussion of “Albany” is a recasting of this earlier essay.

37. Silliman, *Under Albany*, pp. 23–24.

Hinge Pictures/Dividing Lines

Like *Under Albany*, Susan Howe's *Frame Structures* (1996) refigures the poet's earlier work. It collects four of her earliest long poems (*Hinge Picture*, 1974; *Chanting at the Crystal Sea*, 1975; *Cabbage Gardens*, 1979; *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, 1978) in slightly revised versions and adds a long "preface" that gives the book its title. The poems are characterized by their distinctive visual layout: in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, for example, the title (derived, minus the word *secret*, from William Byrd's eighteenth-century journal of explorations in the Virginia wilderness) appears in the center of a blank page with its mirror image (fig. 1), even as

SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE
SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE

7

FIG. 1.—Susan Howe, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 7. Reprinted in Howe, *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974–1979* (New York, 1996), p. 94.

the opening horizontal rectangles (the four-line units have justified left and right margins and double spacing) play on the word *mark*:

mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic a land a
tract indicate position 2 record bunting interval
free also event starting the slightly position of
O about both or don't something INDICATION Americ

made or also symbol sachem maimed as on her for
ar in teacher duct excellent figure MARK lead be
knife knows his hogs dogs a boundary model nucle
hearted land land land district boundary times un³⁸

Here *mark* refers first of all to the surveyor's (William Byrd's) mark made in delineating a boundary between "tract[s]" of forest land. But the mark is also a trace, a sign that points us to specific things that have happened; one thinks of Blake's "London," with its lines, "And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe."³⁹ The poem's opening "Mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic" gives the word *mark* a number of paragrammatic possibilities. "Mark mar ha": stutter is followed by exclamation, an inability, perhaps, to "mark" the boundary in question. Or again, "mar ha" may be parts of the name Martha, the *t* missing in the imagined source manuscript. Here and throughout the text, "boundary manic" is central to the poet's thought; she is mesmerized by questions of "secret" divisions, borders, boundaries, fault lines. Then, too, "Mark" refers both to Howe's father (Mark DeWolfe Howe) and to her son, as the italicized line on the third page of the poem, "for Mark my father; and Mark my son" tells us (*FS*, p. 91). Indeed, the frontispiece informs us that Mark DeWolfe Howe's *Touched with Fire: The Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Harvard University Press, 1947) is one of the poem's sources.

On the second page of *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, we find the following passage:

Close at hand the ocean
until before

38. Susan Howe, *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, in *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974–1979* (New York, 1996), p. 89; hereafter abbreviated *FS*.

39. William Blake, "London," *Songs of Experience* (1794), *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y., 1970), ll. 3–4, p. 26.

hidden from our vision
MARK
border
bulwark. an object set up to indicate a boundary or position
hence a sign or token
impression or trace

The Horizon

I am of another generation
when next I looked he was gone.
[FS, p. 90]

The final line is repeated three times on this page and relates the colonial expedition of William Byrd to the “MARK” who is the poet’s father.

How does this allusive visual poem relate to Howe’s so-called preface, which interweaves autobiography, visual poetry, and the founding and early history of Buffalo? For example:

I was never sure what my father was doing in the army. Then I was never sure of anything what with his rushing away our changing cities and World War banging at windows the boundless phenomena of madness. I remember him coming back to Buffalo from basic training by snapshot once or twice in a uniform. Absence is always present in a picture in its right relation. There is a split then how to act. Laws are relations among individuals.

When Theophile Cazenove reached America in 1789, he realized that Philadelphia was the best scene for his operations because the future of American funds, federal and state, depended on the actions of the federal government. Pavements were in wider space and getting social satisfaction he carried along a letter of introduction from his backers in Amsterdam to Andrew Craigie in New York. The Van Staphorts told Craigie their envoy came to America “to gratify his thirst after knowledge in order to become better acquainted with the Genius of their Government and the objects of their growing commerce.” [FS, p. 6]

The common wisdom would be that these two paragraphs are “straight”—although rather odd—prose; in the first sentence above, for example, the noun phrase “the boundless phenomena of madness” is syntactically but not semantically in apposition to the noun “windows.” And the relation of syntax to semantics gets stranger as the paragraph continues: how, for example, can the poet’s father be “coming back from basic training by snapshot”? Similar non sequiturs characterize the passage about Cazenove, as when “pavements . . . in wider space” are linked to “social satisfaction.”

How to construe this curious way of writing an autobiographical memoir, a memoir designed to serve as “frame structure” for the disjointed and fragmentary lyric poems that follow? In one sense, “Frame Structures” recalls Robert Lowell’s “91 Revere Street,” that bemused account of the Beacon Hill childhood and “Mayflower screwball” ancestry that makes “Young Bob” the neurotic and specially gifted child he is.⁴⁰ But whereas “91 Revere Street” provides us with a series of snapshots, in which the Winslow-Lowell relatives come before us in all their foibles and futility, “Frame Structures” juxtaposes biographical sketches (for example, the poet’s American grandfather, Mark Antony DeWolfe Howe [1864–1960]) with the documentary history of the founding of Buffalo, with allusions to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Evangeline” and James Joyce’s “Eveline” as analogues to the family and social drama of the Howes and Quincys, and with scraps (“flinders”) of largely illegible text, evidently drawn from Edward Gibbon. Again, whereas “91 Revere Street” is a kind of mirror image (in prose) of the autobiographical poems like “Commander Lowell” and “Terminal Days at Beverly Farms” that comprise *Life Studies*, poems that culminate in Lowell’s own very private “Skunk Hour,” in *Frame Structures* the connection between Howe’s memoir and, say, the epigraphs from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* and Beatrix Potter’s *Peter Rabbit* that open *Cabbage Gardens*, remains elusive. Indeed, the oblique narrative that follows, which begins with the lines

The enemy coming on roads
and clouds
aeons.
Cashel has fallen
trees are turf
horizon thanks to myself, yes
pacing the study.
[FS, p. 75]

seem to have no identifiable lyric subject. Here, Howe’s detractors would say, is a cryptic Language poem that denies the very possibilities of the expressivity one wants from lyric.

Or does it? Consider the leitmotif of framing and being framed that runs through both prose preface and visual poems, crisscrossing, in myriad ways, the related motifs of war and colonization. The frontispiece (fig. 2) is an engraving from Frank Severance’s *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, based on “an original sketch by Lt. Jesse D. Elliott, accompanying his report to the Secretary of the Navy on the Capture of the Detroit and Caledonia, dated Black Rock, Oct. 9, 1812.” “The Second Oldest View of Buffalo,” as this depiction of schooners going up in smoke is captioned

40. Robert Lowell, “91 Revere Street,” *Life Studies*, in “*Life Studies*” and “*For the Union Dead*” (New York, 1964), p. 46.

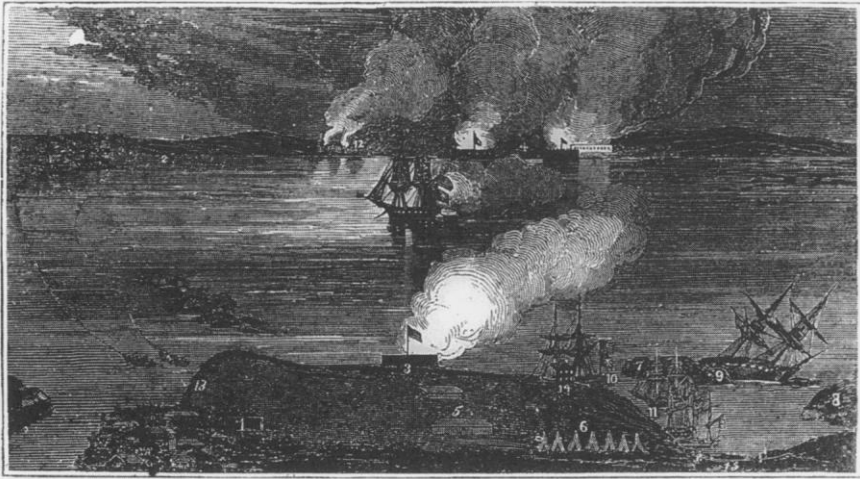


FIG. 2.—“The Second Oldest View of Buffalo,” engraving, Philadelphia, 1845. From an original sketch by Lt. Jesse D. Elliot. Frontispiece, Susan Howe, *Frame Structures*, p. 1.

in Howe’s book, thus immediately introduces the motif of war, in this case the War of 1812 (*FS*, p. 1).

But if this is the “Second Oldest View of Buffalo,” what would the first look like? For Howe, origins cannot be known. “Lines represent the limits of bodies encompassed by the eye” (*FS*, p. 5). The section “Floating loans” contains a historical sketch of Joseph Ellicott’s acquisition and settling of the land in upstate New York that was to be called Buffalo. We can take in the facts but we cannot quite visualize the resulting city. “Space is a frame we map ourselves in” (*FS*, p. 9). When we finally do “see” the Buffalo harbor in the engraving, we are witnessing a war scene; war, for that matter, is very much this poem’s condition. At the same time, “a *picture*,” as Wittgenstein puts it, “held us captive”;⁴¹ neither poet nor reader can get beyond the engraving, the stylized image, to experience the “reality” of Buffalo. This is why names become so tantalizing: Nicholas Van Staphorst, Christiaan Van Eeghen, Paul Busti. We yearn for, but cannot get at, what’s behind them. And consider the absurdity of calling a city Buffalo. “Clans and individuals adopt the name of animals,” Howe remarks, “cities seldom do.” And she adds, “Prefaces are usually afterimages” (*FS*, p. 13).⁴²

The first sentence of Howe’s “afterimage,” under the heading “Flanders,” with its allusion to World War I, is, “On Sunday, December 7, 1941,

41. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1958), §115.

42. Compare Joan Retallack, *Afterimages* (Middletown, Conn., 1995), where poetry itself is treated as complex afterimage.

I went with my father to the zoo in Delaware Park even now so many years after there is always for me the fact of this treasured memory of togetherness before he enlisted in the army and went away to Europe” (*FS*, p. 3). December 7, 1941 is, of course, Pearl Harbor Day, but this fact is not mentioned, the focus being on the “usually docile polar bears roving restlessly back and forth around the simulated rocks caves and waterfall designed to keep brute force fenced off even by menace of embrace so many zoo animals are accounted fierce” (*FS*, p. 3). The final clause here trails off, “so many” not anticipated by what comes before. The three polar bears are framed both literally and figuratively—literally behind the “iron railing” of their cage, figuratively by “the north wind of the fairy story” (“Goldilocks”) “ringing in my ears as well as direct perception” (*FS*, p. 3). From the opening image of (unstated) war malaise, through the accounts of King Philip’s War, the Revolutionary War, World War I, and World War II, the text’s war space is crisscrossed by “life-lines,” lines of descent, connection, and association that, as the poet puts it, “I transmit to you from the point of impact throughout every snowing difficulty,” lines “certified by surveyors chain-bearers artists and authors walking the world keeping Field Notes”: from “Flanders” to “Flinders,”⁴³ from Nigeria, to Niger, to Niagara, from the “iron railings” of the bear compound in the zoo to the “iron railings” of the Charles Street Jail, from Fanny Appleton Longfellow to the poet’s younger sister Fanny (*FS*, p. 28).

But the lines are also borders, boundaries, marks of enclosure—the line between the Boston Brahmin Howes and Quincys on the one hand and the Irish Mannings on the other. “Preface” thus paves the way for the poems that follow: *Hinge Picture*, *Western Borders*, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (my emphasis). And even in *Cabbage Gardens* the shifts in line justification and word placement (fig. 3) suggest that language is always in danger of becoming an enclosed space but that the poet refuses to let forms play their accepted role. Each segment is, so to speak, a “cabbage garden” that is planted differently.⁴⁴

The extensive historical documentation in *Frame Structures* thus serves to construct the past that has shaped what Howe takes to be her very palpable present. Weetamoo, “squaw-sachem of the Wampanoags, Queen of Pocasset (now Tiverton), wife of Wamsutta the son of Massasoit and sister-in-law of the Narragansett sachem, Metacomet (King Philip to the colonial militia),” a figure Howe knows only from her reading of Mary Rowlandson, is just as “real” as John d’Wolf, “Norwest John,” a venture capitalist who “sailed to Russia by way of Alaska” (*FS*, p. 21). The poet

43. In his excellent “Shuffle off to Buffalo: Susan Howe’s *Frame Structures*,” *The Germ* 1 (Fall 1997): 211, Thomas A. Vogler points out that *flinders* is “an archaic word, from the root *splei* = to splice, split, by way of the Scandinavian and Middle English (*flenderis*), meaning bits, fragments, splinters.”

44. I owe this insight to a superb essay on *Cabbage Gardens* by Molly Schwartzburg, a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University.

I the Fly

come from Brighten

hook storm

seawave and salmon

Glass house

Captain Barefoot

gullet of hook

all sky

water captive

valley in the shadow of my hand

hook. Oh I

body. floss silk

hackle. filament of a cock's neck feather

I the fly

gullet here

water captive

FIG. 3.—From Susan Howe, *Cabbage Gardens*, in *Frame Structures*, p. 80. *Cabbage Gardens* was originally published by Fathom Press in 1979 and is unpaginated.

herself appears only in the interstices of the text: “Now draw a trajectory in imagination where logic and mathematics meet the materials of art. Canvas, paper, pencil, color, frame, title” (*FS*, p. 27). Right after this catalogue of artist’s tools (where “title” is the odd item) the cited overprint text becomes illegible (fig. 4), forcing the reader to become a kind of viewer/voyeur.

“Preface” never spells out its “life-lines” to the lyrics that follow. In the words of the epigraph from Duchamp’s *Green Box* that opens *Hinge Picture*—“Perhaps make a HINGE PICTURE. (folding yardstick, book. . .) / develop in space the PRINCIPLE OF THE HINGE in the displacements 1st in the plane 2d in space” (*FS*, p. 32)—“Preface” is a

fifteenth of October, 1764, as I sat mus-
 efooted fryars were singing Vespers in t
 demon darkened intelle
 > decline and fall of the city for
 moment of conception are recorded:
 of conception are recorded the fifteenth of
 if the close of evening, as I sat
 al the place and
 y
 teenth of Octo
 musing in the C
 rs, while they we
 r on the ruins of

Memoirs.

FIG. 4.—Susan Howe, *Frame Structures*, p. 27. The text is from Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

kind of *Hinge Picture* that contains connections to the historical and literary fragments that follow. Indeed, Howe’s book is an elaborate trace structure: *Secret History of the Dividing Line* ends with a verbal rectangle on an otherwise empty white field:

sh dispel iris sh snow sward wide ha
 forest l a boundary manic a land sh
 whit thing : target cadence marked on
 O about both or don’t INDICATION Americ
 sh woof subdued toward foliage free sh

[*FS*, p. 122]

From “sh” to “sh,” from “snow sward” to “foliage free,” via a “boundary manic,” a “target cadence marked.” “Sh.” The rest is white space.

Compared to the “Robert Lowell” of *Life Studies*, Howe’s “I”—female, maverick, only half New England blueblood—is much less of an insider, much more self-conscious about her particular origins. Her Boston is always shadowed by her Buffalo. Accordingly, she rarely speaks in her own person (for example, “I was a deep and nervous child” [*FS*, p. 3]), preferring the voice of the chronicler (“Joseph Ellicott, sometimes called

'the father of Buffalo,' was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1760 to Quaker parents from England" [FS, p. 5]), and the voices of others:

What are you crying for, Great-Grandmother?

For all the ruin so intolerably sad.

But we have plenty to eat. We are lucky to be living in the United States, so very new and very old, lucky to be in the new part. Everything is clearer now we have electric light.

You must go on as if I was an open door. Go right on through me I can't answer all your questions.

[FS, p. 25]

Add to such voices the visual devices—line placement, typography, page design—that characterize all four of the early books reprinted in *Frame Structures*, as well as the new preface, and you have a signature (quite literally a series of marks made on paper) as unique and "personal" as any we have in poetry today. Susan Howe and Ron Silliman, included as they both are in every anthology of "Language poetry" to date, could hardly be more different in their modes of self-writing.

What then of the purported death of the subject? "The revolution of the word," Silliman remarks in a recent interview, "is not an anarchist event." On the contrary, "as the author, I get to determine *unilaterally* which words in what order will set forth the terms through which the experience shall occur."⁴⁵ A remarkable statement, this, for a Language poet, and yet, at one level, it is simple common sense: every poet, after all, gets to determine the words in his or her poem. The question remains, of course, what larger cultural and ideological constraints determine that determination. If Silliman and Howe's poetry is, as I have argued, a complex amalgam of Language poetics and *difference*, a writing that is everywhere resisting its paradigm, how, to look at the half-full cup as half empty, does that paradigm itself resist its contemporary others?

Suppose we read the poems of Silliman and Howe (or Palmer or Scalapino or Watten cited above), not against one another, but against those of a very different poetic community—for example, the work of Charles Wright. Here is one of the thirteen-line lyrics (there are twenty-four, divided into three sections) in Wright's recent sequence "Disjecta Membra," included in James Tate's *Best American Poetry 1997*:

O well the snow falls and small birds drop out of the sky,

The backyard's a winding sheet—

winter in Charlottesville,

45. Silliman, interview with Vogler and Thomas Marshall, *Quarry West* 34 (1998): 24–25.

Epiphany two days gone,
Nothing at large but Broncos, pick-ups and 4 × 4s.
Even the almost full moon
is under a monochrome counterpane

Of dry grey.

Eve of St. Agnes and then some, I'd say,
Twenty-three inches and coming down.
The Rev. Doctor Syntax puts finger to forehead on the opposite wall,
Mancini and I still blurred beside him, Mykonos, 1961,
The past a snowstorm the present too.⁴⁶

The obvious thing would be to say that Wright's lyric sequence, which traces the poet's emptying out, his night and death thoughts, and the gradual renewal of being, as defined by the seasonal cycle from the end of summer to the end of winter in Virginia, is more "personal" or "expressive" than the "Language poems" of Silliman or Howe. But, strictly speaking, we learn less about the particulars of Wright's personal life than we do about theirs; people and places from the poet's past and present remain elusive as do the causes that trigger the feeling of absence and emptiness described so lovingly in this particular snow poem, where even "the almost full moon / is under a monochrome counterpane / of dry grey."

What is different is not expressivity or subjectivity as such but the *authority* ascribed to the speaking voice—and here it is a particular voice that is represented. Wright's speaker confidently uses metaphor to characterize what he perceives ("The backyard's a winding sheet") and feels ("Epiphany two days gone"); he compares the dismal sleety night to that of Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes* and knows that what he sees when he looks out the window are "nothing . . . but Broncos, pick-ups and 4 × 4s." In "Albany," on the other hand, such connections and continuities (Wright's winter portrait is wholly consistent and of a piece) are implicitly judged to be impossible. Phrases like "the bird demonstrates the sky" or "eminent domain" cannot be taken as self-revelatory. For these utterances, in Silliman's scheme of things, are not those of an observer located in a particular place; indeed, the distinction between inside and outside has been eroded. For Silliman, as for Howe, there are no ideas or facts outside the language that names them—no "Broncos, pick-ups and 4 × 4s," no "twenty-three inches" of snow, outside the poet's verbal as well as literal window. Rather—and here the difference in epistemology is profound—language constructs the "reality" perceived. And this means that perspective, as in the polar bear scene in Howe's *Frame Structures*, is always shifting and that the subject, far from being at the center of the discourse, as is the case in Wright's poem, is located only at its interstices.

It is not coincidental that "Disjecta Membra" has echoes of Keats

46. Charles Wright, "Disjecta Membra," in *The Best American Poetry 1997*, ed. James Tate (New York, 1997), p. 194.

(and, later, Stevens), for its mode is Emersonian: "We live in the wind-chill, / The what-if and what-was-not, / The blown and sour dust of just after or just before, / The metaquotidian landscape / of soft edge and abyss."⁴⁷ Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. There is no way Silliman or Howe could write such a poem because theirs is not a romantic *Einfühlung* into the external—is there an external?—world. And, in this respect, we can differentiate quite readily between their ethos and that of such mainstream postromantic poets as Charles Wright or Mark Strand or Louise Gluck.

It was, of course, the opposition to this romantic paradigm that prompted the theoretical discourse of Language manifestos in the first place. And that oppositionality remains significant even though the us-versus-them rhetoric of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, now twenty years old, has become complicated by the appearance of new poetic paradigms that don't quite fit the original theoretical frame.⁴⁸ The dialectic, in other words, has shifted ground, and it now seems more useful to look at special cases *within* the Language movement and related alternate poetics rather than at the group phenomenon.

Indeed, the paradox is that, like the earlier avant-garde movements of the century, Language poetics may well become most widely known when it starts to manifest notable exceptions. Imagism, after all, became interesting only when Ezra Pound declared that it had been diluted as "Amygism" and called himself a Vorticist instead. Dada, as I have suggested elsewhere,⁴⁹ derives much of its cultural capital from Duchamp, who had made his most "dada" readymades before he had ever heard of the Cabaret Voltaire and who refused all his life to participate in dada exhibitions. A renewal of interest in Concrete Poetry was sparked by the decision of one Concrete poet, Ian Hamilton Finlay, to cultivate (quite literally) his own "concrete" Scottish garden. And the New York school, felt by many to have lost its center when Frank O'Hara died in 1966, is now getting renewed mileage from the increasing renown of one of its charter members, John Ashbery, even though Ashbery's poetry may well have more in common with T. S. Eliot's than with Kenneth Koch's.⁵⁰

47. Ibid.

48. See *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Bernstein (Carbondale, Ill., 1984). The first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* appeared in 1978.

49. Perloff, "Dada Duchamp/Duchamp and Dada: Avant-Garde Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Stanford Humanities Review* (Winter 1999).

50. The irony is that Eliot was the enemy of the New York Poets; Frank O'Hara, for example, was given to statements like, "Lord! Spare us from any more Fisher kings!" (quoted in Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters*, 2d ed. [Chicago, 1997], p. 25). In his recent *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York, 1998), David Lehman tries to revive the case for a New York school, emphasizing the group affiliations of Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch at Harvard, the relations with painters in New York, and the legacy to the so-called Second Generation of New York Poets. But the bulk of his book, ironically enough, contains individual chapters on his chosen four (Ash-

I do not mean to downplay the role of community, movement, cultural formation, or discourse in the making of avant-garde aesthetic. Community, after all, is crucial to the poets and artists who belong to it, especially in their formative stages. Indeed, the prominence of the lonely, isolated genius, which Jameson takes to be the hallmark of modernism (as opposed to postmodernism), was always something of a myth; even those “isolated geniuses” Joyce and Beckett needed a community of fellow writers and a set of publishing venues—for example, Eugene Jolas’s *transition*—within which to circulate.

The poet has no obligation to be a responsible historian; indeed, the anxiety of influence precludes the possibility of reliable accounts of one’s own genealogy. Here is where the poet’s readers come in. In writing as critics or literary historians, even those who are themselves poets must maintain some critical distance, discriminating, for example, between the “Language” poetics of Michael Palmer, with its Celanian and French surrealist cast, the New York school-based Language poetics of Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman, and the fusion of “nation language” and “video style” in the work of a proto-Language poet like Kamau Brathwaite.⁵¹

Movement ethos, itself the stepchild of the poststructuralist critique of authorship, has, for too long now, occluded the critical need to discriminate *difference*, to define the signature of the individual lyric subject in its complex negotiations with its larger cultural and historical field of operation. In the words of Charles Bernstein’s satiric little poem on the limits of structuralism, “Don’t Be So Sure (*Don’t Be Saussure*)”:

My cup is my cap
 & my cap is my cup
 When the coffee is hot
 It ruins my hat
 We clap and we slap
 Have sup with our pap
 But won’t someone please
 Get me a drink⁵²

bery, O’Hara, Koch, James Schuyler), the unanticipated effect being to stress difference, both in quality and in mode, rather than group allegiance.

51. For these terms, see Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London, 1984), p. 13, and Elaine Savory, “Wordsongs & Wordwounds / Homecoming: Kamau Brathwaite’s Barabajan Poems,” *World Literature Today* 68 (Autumn 1994): 750–57.

52. Bernstein, “Revenge of the Poet-Critic,” *My Way*, p. 5.