

“LANGUAGE” IN POETRY *

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I would like to propose, as counters, two varieties of self in current verse practice. The first, the “conservative” subject, can be described by analogy to the ownership of property in a patriarchal, agrarian economy —much like the one that produced *The Kenyon Review*:

The sense of person that is engaged is like that between owner of property. It's almost like a society of gentleman farmers; we each have our estates, but all estates are similar to a certain extent; estates are run on certain principles. Now, when it comes to the personal, it's an anecdote —my daughter fell off a horse, she was so beautiful as she fell— an anecdote that occurs within the form of an estate that the poem imitates, (In *Ottotole 2* [1987]: 28-60).

That form of self in poetry I think may be recognized in the standard anthologies of fifties verse such as the Hall/Pack/Simpson anthology. A narrow representationalism governs the form, which then elevates its content by means of such poetic strictures as extended metaphor, meter, and rhyme. But for its audience the form is not so much a demonstration of poetic craft as it is a guarantee of meaning in its limitation of the world —hence its acceptance. This tradition continues in many contemporary poets who have largely rejected the old signs of poetic craft but kept the moral necessity of a referentially delimited address.

For the Donald Allen anthology and its legacy, I would propose a “liberal” self, one that admits to bleeding into the margins of the unknown (the heterogeneous and its equivalents in the psyche) and by that act absorbs the difference —which could be social instabilities as much as personal ones. “Ginsberg had literalized *his* development by shamelessly avowing his oedipal urges and his mother's suicide; he had literalized his complexity” (ibid.). Where the virtue of the “conservative” self is its stability and resilience to change —it is itself a trope— the “liberal” self suffers the fate of the world it addresses; it acts out the doubt that is constitutive of its assumed audience. At the same time, an instrumentalism of address rather than reference (of *I* rather than *it*) only increases the disparity between speaker and

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hearer in a public discourse framed from the speaker's side. "His rhetoric of self was not impeded by questions of context and intention that I felt to be unresolved". The very "openness" of such poetry in this sense closes off poetic speech to others.

Such "selves" are stabilities not only of practice but of reception —the labor of art achieving a stability in a meaningful form. This meaning is returned to again and again. The poet's self —the persona as seen through the work— becomes a "touchstone" in the meditations of others in their trajectories within the culture. All this is perfectly descriptive —and fine— except for two points: these forms have run their courses and have become exhausted; meanwhile, conditions have changed. Enter the notion of "language" in the history of American poetry. What does this *mean*? To begin with, there is an anxiety about assigning a value to "language" that might be a part of its meaning —and its use. The question is unresolved. We can, with this openness of meaning in mind, proceed to a notion of poetic production and value as being (at this moment) played off against the resonances of the culture at large —against its very resistance or assent.

So, "language" is a site for production: what does *this* mean? It certainly doesn't mean the "life of the poet" —at least not yet. Biography is closure, as in a recently encountered example, Walter Jackson Bate on Johnson:

Though he still had immense human resources despite his age —resources in humor, compassion, and imaginative understanding generally— there was also some conscious effort on his part. For he was now sixty. Even if we leave aside the accumulated pile of psychological distress from which he hoped he was at last emerging, he was often physically far from well (a painful combination of three illnesses the following spring —lumbago, muscular inflammation around the loins and belly, and a bronchial inflammation that spread to the trachea...). He was only too aware that he was entering the final period of his life, during which problems of health alone —not to mention problems of every other sort— were bound to multiply. (434).

When I read biography, I proceed directly to psychological morass —never better exemplified than in this quote. Johnson's "resources" of human nature giving out, he was condemned to "conscious effort" —this a part of his realization that his life was now approximately 83% over. If this is what it takes to become conscious... it's all over for us!

That is why, as a poet, I became interested in linguistics (very possibly at a certain point in my life).

Starting from the point of production in language —from "close readings" of poetry to serious linguistic inquiry to the act of writing to mediations on communicative aporias in Sesame Street —to "visions" of Mr. Rogers on Johnny Carson, and vice versa, of the semiotics of advertising or the meaning of conversational style —I could go on forever; there's everything to do. Interest in "language" is the point of entry to "strands in a culture" than can be called into question —and remade. Or we can be remade in relation to them; or we can admit

the objectivity of our condition and at least have that knowledge without default to the monsters of misrepresentation that are administered to us daily as part of the workings of the state. Language is the site of an autonomy that argues back, and that offers possibilities of construction and refiguring of elements that are given. (It is not primarily concerned with "expression" —in that what can be expressed is necessarily only an affirmation of the given, the human verities that argue us back into literary nothings.)

In the act of composition, in extending oneself out from this act, "language" is engaged not as something in its own right, not as an entity or "thing in itself" —a bowl of alphabet soup, a dictionary, the magnetic resonances in neurons or computer chips— but as the site for a divergence (not a difference) that acts on the categories of cognition and the frames of cultural experience; it is the point at which agency occurs.

A second, and related, question is how much can one use, in the composition of poetry, of the accumulated resources of linguistic science over the last seventy-five years. Much recent work in linguistics takes language as an assumed ground against which its own procedures can be negatively known. While language is theorized as existing by virtue of an innate set of abstract procedures, central to the procedure by which these rules will be determined is a disunity of language— which is broken down to levels of function that each must be understood in terms of their own laws. One of the last of such levels to be understood (because perhaps the farthest from these abstract rules) is the level of language *use*. Not much for the composition of poetry here. Post-generative linguistics has developed out of this work of linguistic disunification with a more positivist description of language as involving a relativism of linguistic levels (sound, syntax, speech acts, experiential frames) that leaves us with carefully separated but at least tractable analyses of parts of language (and cognition and communication) that we can put in play. We might add to this short history the contributions of structuralist linguistics, with its emphasis on signification, and speech act and discourse theory, with their emphases on conditions of reference and interaction, and arrive at an array of elements of language that are available for production —for our use in poetry and in gaining access to our situation and our selves.

In other words, *technique*. But the ends to which this technique are put are not "language" —that is the meaning of *method*. (I do not want to think about *style*).

If the devices of language unconverged by the sciences of language offer, in Steve Benson's phrase, "opportunities for decisive engagement", the overall motivations for such constructive possibilities are larger, ultimately engaging the largest of epistemological frames. In other words, attention to and structuring of writing at the level of "language" does not in any sense end in the production of "nonobjective" works that exclude apples and oranges and all their implications. Rather, the use of such devices argues into a series of related issues such as: habit and the psychology of everyday life; the partializing discourses of specialization and the dialogism of social reality; ideology seen in the "political" construction of the subject. But how these questions can be approached through writing —how

they can be altered through agency— very much depends on seeing language not holistically but from the ground up, as the sum of its parts being not only more than the whole but all there is.

Imagine a writing undertaken at the level of *the word*, and then consider this passage from the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky:

Someone walked down a sidestreet either fifteen or thirty years. Each day he read a sign, “Big Selection of Sig”, and each day he thought: “Who needs a big selection of sig?” (108)

The word here is problematized as an autonomous sign. How can this be put into use? An anecdote obtrudes. An older married couple were having a domestic dispute —for “either fifteen or thirty years”— concerning a kitchen stool with a broken but not totally dysfunctional leg. The broken leg reminded the man of everything lacking in his wife— her inefficiency, her forgetfulness, her chaos. He wanted it thrown away. The wife held the line. Her husband’s demands symbolized everything lacking in him —his attachment to detail, his compulsiveness, his formalism. The chair with the broken leg would stay; if it went, she would go too. After years of bitter dispute, a compromise was reached: a new chair, like the old one but without the broken leg, would be fabricated to appear indistinguishable from the first. Now the chair could be both kept and thrown away, and life returned to its predictable patterns in the presence of the simulacrum.

The solution is transparent: the chair is exactly the same, but different. (If this anecdote were my poem, in place of the simulacral chair I would substitute and oversized, inflated pink elephant, or some other resistant counter —even if its inevitable transparency would end the marriage in a few months.) These chairs and elephants can be thought of as words —the first example in a stylistically neutral setting (the achieved pseudoperfections of diction and tone in recent academic verse) and the second acting out with the insistence that something had to be done in this context and things had better change.

What I want to emphasize is the constructive potential of linguistic devices —in this case at the level of the word— and their use in larger, more complex dynamics that are really their motivation. Taking some representative examples of writing at the level of the “word” from my own work, to begin with in the poem “Radio”:

The flames are sponges
in smoke-blackened hour
Blighted fruits words can’t grasp.
Among stations immeasurable across fields
a flashing sign
fixes only certainty
Two eyes blinking through a door.
The missing head must be seen whole
where one word leads

clouds to accident of end.
The machine never tires.
Edges of stations start to come in.

"Clouds to accident of end" occurred first as words: the word *clouds* to the word *accident* to the word *end*. But in the poem it becomes a capsule biography, this taken from the point of view of high lyricism (and as a word source, Lee Harwood's translation of Tristan Tzara). Lyricism, the total form, is being rewritten at the level of the word. A different writing at the level of the word occurs in a recent work, titled "The Word":

Extract X triggers response, activating conscious time.
Form = original romantic milk.
Representation ends private response ever since
 eternity... now that a thought is only
 news.
Word = our renewed description.

Here, a variation on Jackson Mac Low's device of taking a word (like *w o r d*) as the basis for a series of selections (of words) that spell out the word. The use of the "word" as constructive device here is quite different, in passing, from the stylistic evaluation of William Carlos Williams's attention to diction to be found in Robert Pinsky's recent review of Williams's *Collected Poems*:

"Fleckless light" is elevated and poetic, whereas "separately in unison" is obsessively precise, and while "coping" and "eight foot strips" are technical in another way, it is hard to say if "strewn" is archaic and high like "fleckless". —or the most technical term of all, a part of the sweet old jargon of the crafts and trades, and their techniques. (*New York Times Book Review*, 4 January 1987, 20).

The notion of language here is the opposite of constructive; rather it reduces the conflicts embodied in Williams's "battle of diverse thoughts" at the level of diction to a question of connoisseurship. "Fleckless light" is seen through the same rose-colored glasses as "the sweet old jargon of the trades". Art is reduced to artfulness, embodied in felicities of tone —ending in an affect of "excellence" that is very far from Williams's intention. The motivations for the literary act, particularly at the level of the word, fall by the wayside in any larger sense.

To speak of writing at the level of the word is to merely scratch the surface of the meaning of linguistic devices, not to mention their use. In general, I would stress the divergence of these devices from "assumed" contexts as the basis of their constructive potential. In the examples of writing at the level of the word, it's the refiguring of lyricism, the self-production of meaning or definition, or the reordering of conceptual reality that is of interest —rather than the fit of style appreciated for posterity, later. Reordering cognition is more difficult to pin down

than commenting on literary modes, but perhaps this quote from *Progress* might suggest one way that might be conceived:

But the little man in a car...
 Can only be a car,
 it is a car,
 An other one can never be,
 Nor do you give it credit
 For anything but willful drive...

But this is outside science.

The constitutive metaphor of the journey as inherent in literary forms, particularly those dealing with such notions as “progress” (discussed by George Lakoff), is here reified in the form of a counter of everyday life, the car as perceived as having an agency of its own, the man in the car (the driver) only equaling that agency, and all reification (the *it*) having a value informed by this agency. In other words, you just don’t refer to cognition but remake it through the entire act of a poem; “But this is outside science,” properly so.

Two other linguistic levels command my active attention in writing (and one doesn’t). The use of the literary sentence, as discussed in Ron Silliman’s “The New Sentence,” diverges from all such proposition as “This is the case” that underpin our discourses. It is quite possible, for example, to make an argument that is “the case” on the basis of an entire series of propositions that aren’t, as in my poem “Plasma”. This level of argument transcending the propositional involves the entire discursive frame of poetry, and it is at this point, I think, that the poem most immediately engages experience —in the form in which what we say *and* what we do is bounded by the properties of speech between a speaker and a hearer, either of which who might be multiple or unknown. Finally, it is the entire construction of the subject that is relevant to this level of language, and the poem enacts a particular divergence to this level as its most active intervention. It may be true that “I hate speech,” and am speaking right now in writing, but writing is given as speech and it is in that form that its transformative work is accomplished. (Parenthetically, a level of language that does not particularly engage my attention is that of sound for its own sake, sound below the level of sense; I see little in language’s *difference* from itself at this level that can’t be explicitly stated.)

Each of these levels of language (even sound) offers a kind of action; taking them together, it is their use in poetry as a critique of action (conceptual and experiential) that engages me most. Taken as action, poetry uses language as the point of departure for a divergence from the assumed; at the level of the word, a naming or a blanking out; at the level of the sentence, a proposition in all its modality; at the level of discourse, communication offered or withheld. These actions of language set the stage for a further refiguring —systems of belief to be called to account, one’s self-knowledge to be modified in the act, and larger

questions of context to be delivered to our mutual attention. At least, that is what I would like.

But lest this be rejected as simply technique, consider the following specimen of overview as symptomatic of the subject's relation to the particulars of our time. In a recent review of the "A Visit to Salon of Autumn," Peter Schejldahl writes:

What little masters have are notions of how to do a thing, notions perhaps a little too demanding and unforgiving, all but guaranteeing a certain margin of failure. Such artists are probably priests of failure. This is no mean or unnecessary thing in a world, and not just an art world, where failure is the rule, and "success" is a glittering but dubious and temporary condition. The little master gives animation and honor to a realm of chronic and painful uncertainty [read necessity], which would otherwise be a howling waste. (*Art in America*, December 1986, 19)

I don't think I've ever encountered a more "howling" denunciation of agency in art —of course reserved for the waste products of the system rather than the stars— but one might also say. "It's in the work." The idea here of "how to do a thing" is the dead end of all technique, and it seemed to have foundered at mutually constitutive points in the productions and consumption of art. What this means for reception is another thing: that world of art seems to me —apart from its sheer demonstration of encapsulated phenomena— less and less real. Reading this bit of Schjeldahl is like encountering the last Jack-in-the-Box in the world that still works. But the situation of the subject is exactly stated: surrounded by a created world of irrelevance, all he can hope for is to "wake up." The passivity is flagrant.

The interest in language, then, is the insistence on technique —and the meaning of technique is finally a new role for the artist. The real question is not What kind of art? but What kind of action is implicated in this art? Writing leads not only to ways of thinking about the world but to ways of acting in the largest sense —for which writing is the necessary first step. The act is prospective, by which we will know what we will be.