# NOT "LITERARY PRACTITIONERS OF DECONSTRUCTION"

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Critics, both hostile ones such as Eliot Weinberger and friendly ones such as Jerome McGann, have associated "language poetry" with the French intellectual tendency known as deconstruction. In an open letter to Michael Davidson in *Sulfur* 22, Weinberger calls language poets "literary practitioners of deconstruction." The reader must infer from the general tenor of Weinberger's letter that he believes deconstruction to be inimical to good poetry, though he never confronts this issue directly. Likewise he never specifies how language poets manifest the alleged deconstructive tendencies. The reader is left to guess. I would guess that Weinberger believes language poetry intends to exemplify what Derrida has called "the logic of supplementarity" in which meaning is always deferred and "you are indefinitely referred to a concatenation without basis, without end, an indefinitely articulated retreat." (*Dissemination*).

There is one poet I can think of whose work has been celebrated for seeming to enact this perpetual retreat of meaning. He is John Ashbery —not someone typically associated with the language group. As Ashbery writes in "As You Came From The Holy Land",

it is finally as though that thing of monstrous interest were happening in the sky but the sun is setting and prevents you from seeing it

In Ashbery's poems one rolls along narrative's tracks against a constantly shifting series of backdrops, without any arrival. One will never learn what is of monstrous interest. This is a narrative of deliberately empty signs.

Do language poets such as Barrett Watten and Bob Perelman carry on this task of poetic deconstruction? I think I can show pretty easily that they don't intend to. In the poem "Direct Address" in his new book *Conduit*, Watten writes "what Ashbery made into/a house of cards, I revive." By his own claim, Watten sounds more like a constructivist than a deconstructionist. This is not a deceptively smooth narrative of empty signs, but a non-narrative whose signs (things) are problematically over-determined. In the title poem, "Conduit", Watten writes, "Every road ends in an object". What are some of the objects Watten's roads, or lines, end at?

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A great black and yellow W-2 rocket, 46 feet long, stands in an empty desert.

Depending on who is the host of the Benny Hill Show.

These lines present certain obvious challenges to the reader. First, how did this rocket get here? Such information is not available either to a reader or a desert traveller. It's interesting that our ignorance of these matters is often more painful to us when we confront it in a poem than when we do so on the road. We want to know why a rocket suddenly appears in our text (desert). It's a question Watten's elliptical style succeeds in raising. Second, how does military hardware relate to an entertainment such as the Benny Hill Show? Does one distract us from the other? The absence of narrative prevents that from happening here. Perhaps what connects these stanzas is that in each of them identity wobbles. A "W-2" is more often a tax form than a rocket; Benny Hill may or may not be the host of his own show. The problem of finding some way to integrate these things is exactly that —a problem raised with an urgency uncharacteristic of deconstruction. In fact, Watten may have in mind what's often identified as the apolitical character of deconstruction when he writes in "Conduit",

Then comes

the attack.

Why it does not disturb us is an infinite regression in which nothing is at stake.

Such a linear regression would occur if, as Derrida has written, "There is no outside of the text". The possibility of an exit from "the text" is something I'm not prepared to comment on, but I know that Watten's book, *Conduit*, is full of exit signs. The poem, "Direct Address", names many real persons, living and dead, to remind the reader of history in progress. Often, he combines the names of literary figures with reference to modern technology, i.e.

Mallarmé's perfection of package design.

Or,

Lautréamont and Rimbaud miss trains.

Watten's overall strategy seems to be to create as much friction as possible, both within and between lines, in order to make this book mimetic of the contradictions of ongoing history.

Bob Perelman's new book, *Face Value*, attempts to demystify the workings of ideology in our culture, especially in the mass media. It's difficult to imagine why

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critics such as Weinberger would associate Perelman's poetry with deconstruction. Perhaps it is because Perelman is not what Peter Daws has called, in *Logics of Disintegration*, a "naive objectivist". Perelman realizes that, in post-modern society, experience is heavily mediated and he writes, often parodically, about such mediation. In "The Freeze", a poem whose title suggests both the nuclear freeze movement and cinematic freeze-framing, he writes:

The king is still in his counting house, his index finger pointing at the first gold piece, his mouth pronouncing the number one.

This stanza seems to join the deconstructionist attack on the notion of the singular subject (king) in possession of his utterance (gold piece). It soon turns out, however, that the target of Perelman's attack is not subjectivity per se, but the fatuous nostalgia for the private self so prevalent in the typical "work-shop poem",

Though we don't have a king any more.

We do have a complex system of networks, advertisers dangling from writers dangling from cameramen dangling from stockholders.

Perelman's analysis of the difficulties of "the subject" refers us not to philosophical conundrums, but to present social conditions.

If Weinberger meant that language poets exemplify the theories of deconstruction by deliberately approximating unmeaning, he couldn't prove it by quoting Perelman. Perelman's writing contains, if anything, a surfeit of reference and intent, not a paucity of them. The first stanza of "The Freeze" reads,

I remember my thighs.
I was in a movie. I was asleep,
but voting, trying to remain inconspicuous.
I saw what I saw and I felt what I felt.
At the time I thought nothing of it.

This passage, although surprising and paradoxical, does not resist interpretation. Its humor derives from its parody of a familiar type of first person narrative which asserts the primacy of personal experience. "I saw what I saw, and felt what I felt". The immediacy of experience is, of course, undermined by the fact that "It was in a movie". This serves as an instance of the intervention of mass media in the constitution of self.

Does the bracketing of action inside a movie imply that, as Derrida has said, "there is no outside of the text?" Perhaps. The satirical tone of the passage, however, suggests otherwise. The dominance of textuality here is focussed on as

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historical, temporal fact rather than a priori postulate. "At the time I thought nothing of it" is a sentence that implies the necessity for change so that the subject can avoid being "asleep, but voting". It should be clear that this is not only a description of the current political situation, but a condemnation of it. Perelman's writing is oppositional whereas, as Peter Daws notes in *Logics of Disintegration*, "...deconstruction... has been accused of undermining the possibility of rational opposition to existing institutions, and therefore of accomodating, even if indirectly, to the status quo".

In fact, the dissimilarities between these "language poems" and what is suggested by Derrida et al. are so great that I wonder how the assumption of their relatedness could have gained currency. The question for language poets is not whether it is of value to be a "literary practitioner of desconstruction". That is not what they intend. Watten, for instance, seems to want to constuct a paradigm of social conflict, while Perelman aims for a satiric demystification of culture. A better question would be whether they can "revive" —to quote Watten— any part of the world by writing works which put things not only in doubt, but "at stake".