

ARTIFICE ONCE MORE: “POST-STRUCTURALIST” POETRIES IN THE AGE OF DONAHUE

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... the natural words in the natural order is the formula.

W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley (LDW 56)

... “Natural: the very word should be struck from the language.”

Charles Bernstein, “Stray Straws and Straw Men”
(CD 40)

In his famous lecture “The Music of Poetry” (1942), T. S. Eliot declared:

... there is one law of nature more powerful than any [other]... the law that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear.

Whether poetry is accentual or syllabic, rhymed or rhymeless, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose contact with the changing face of common intercourse. (OPP 21)

And a few pages later:

So, while poetry attempts to convey something beyond what is conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, one person talking to another... Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be, a return to common speech. This is the revolution which Wordsworth announced in his prefaces, and he was right: but the same revolution had been carried out a century before by Oldham, Waller, Denham, and Dryden; and the same revolution was due again something over a century later... No poetry, of course, is ever exactly the same speech that the poet talks and hears: but it has to be in such a relation to the speech of his time that the listener or reader can say ‘that is how I should talk if I could talk poetry’. (OPP 23-24)

A poetry that sounds like *good talk*, a poetry that is —but is also more than— *normal, everyday, speech*: Eliot's prescription is still very much with us. Open any of the more popular poetry magazines —say, the March/April 1988 issue of *American Poetry Review*— and you will come across statements like the following, made by the poet Gerald Stern about a new collection by a fellow-poet: “Arthur Vogelsang's concerns are completely the concerns of our time. He speaks to us in a language that is our language and he speaks like on-one else” (15). Stern's formula, we should note, is pure Wordsworth: in the 1802 “*Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*”, Wordsworth asks, “What is a poet?” And he replies: “He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (877). A man speaking to men and yet more sensitive, more imaginative, indeed wiser than ordinary men —this Romantic definition of the poet was to become a High Modernist axiom. “We alone”, writes Yeats to his poet-friend Dorothy Wellesley, “think like a wise man, yet express our selves like the common people” (LDW 58). And, again, in a letter to his father of 1913, “I have tried to make my work convincing with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling” (WADE 583). Which leads us right to Charles Olson's famous aphorism, “A poet is a man on his feet, talking”.

The identification of poetry with *manhood* is one I shall come back to later; for the moment, consider the curious emphasis, in Modernist discourse, on the role of poetry as purgative —a kind of cold shower. “The *norm* for a poet's language”, writes Eliot, “is the way his contemporaries talk” (PV, xvii), provided, of course, that such talk —the language of the tribe, as Eliot, following Mallarmé, put it— is *purified*, cleansed, given a well-deserved lift, the social function of poetry being, in Eliot's words, no less than “to affect the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation” (OPP 12). And Yeats describes his own process of self-modernisation as an infusion of “cold light and tumbling clouds” (AUTO 48).

Conversely, the enemy of Modernism is said to be *artifice*, specifically the *artifice* of separating the *word* from the “natural object” to which it ostensibly refers. “We should write out our own thoughts”, said Yeats in his *Autobiography*, “in as nearly as possible the language we thought them in, as though in a letter to an intimate friend. We should not *disguise them in any way*” (AUTO 102, my italics). Hence Eliot is critical of Valéry because “the words set free by [him] may tend to form a separate language. But the farther the idiom, vocabulary, and syntax of poetry depart from those of prose, the more artificial the language of poetry will become” (PV xvi). For Eliot, *artificial* is an honorific term because it implies that *words* can somehow be detached from *things*: as he put it with respect to Swinburne: “It is, in fact, the word that gives him the thrill, not the object. When you take to pieces any verse of Swinburne, you find always the object was not there —only the word” (ESE 326). And why would this be so bad? Because “Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified”. Whereas in Swinburne: “[word and object] are identified... solely

because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment" (ESE, 327).

The fear that the word will no longer adhere to the object haunts the poetics of modernism. But Eliot's is no longer Wordsworth's faith in the unmediated power of language to convey "the essential passions of the heart". "Low and rustic life was generally chosen", explains Wordsworth in a famous passage, "because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated language" (869-70). Critics have almost invariably patronized this somewhat defensive explanation, arguing that, in fact, Wordsworth's poetic language was hardly that of "low and rustic life", or conversely, that if and when Wordsworth did adopt "the language really used by men", he could hardly help but trivialize his poetry.

But from our perspective almost two-hundred years later, we may perhaps best understand Wordsworth's predilection for "the language really spoken by men" as a kind of holding operation against the encroachments of an industrial mass society in which that language would undergo modes of mediation that would hardly involve communication "with the best objects from which the best object of language is originally derived". Indeed, a few pages further into the *Preface*, Wordsworth refers somewhat bitterly to the "multitude of causes, unknown to former times, now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind... The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies" (872).

The hourly gratification of a "craving", on the part of the masses, "for extraordinary incident", a craving produced by the increasing "uniformity" of human occupation: here Wordsworth uncannily anticipates the problematic that now haunts some of our most original poetry. In Charles Bernstein's words in "Dysraphism":

Blinded by avenue and filled with
adjacency. Arch or arched at. So there becomes bottles,
hushed conductors, illustrated proclivities for puffed-
up benchmarks. Morose or comotose. (S 44)

A line like "Blinded by avenue and filled with / adjacency", for that matter, surely brings to mind Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us, late and soon / Getting and spending we lay waste our powers". But what has happened to "the language really used by men"? To "the natural words in the natural order"? "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo": there's a straightforward

“normal” declarative sentence that anyone who has heard of Michelangelo can understand. Or again, “April is the cruellest month”: a sentence that, if not quite plausible as a natural utterance, April conventionally being the month of spring rebirth, is certainly readily apprehended as a syntactic unit: subject nominative, copula, predicate nominative. But what sort of sentence is “Arch or arched at”? Is “Arch” a noun or a verb? If a verb, who is doing the arching? What does it mean to be “arched at?” And is the meaning of “Arch” the same as that of “arched”?

It may be that the fracture of language found in a poem like “Dysraphism” is merely perverse, the sort of willful and pretentious obscurantism Eliot warned about when he declared that poetry “cannot afford to lose contact with the changing face of common intercourse”. Or is it possible that Eliot himself paid insufficient attention to the potential for *change* that “common intercourse” was inevitably undergoing? Despite his announced adoption, in 1930, of Royalism, Anglo-Catholicism, and classicism, there is no suggestion that Eliot ever abandoned his Romantic, indeed Rousseauistic faith in writing as the making present of a prior *natural* speech. In *Burnt Norton*, we read:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay whit imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (ECP 121)

the implication being, of course, that, when the poetic moment is right, words indeed *can* represent the realities behind them, realities that, so Eliot would have it, the poet might share with the “ordinary” or “common” man of his time. Precision, in this context, is accuracy of transcription: the poet conveys, more precisely than can his non-poetic counterpart, how it feels to undergo a particular set of experiences. Writing, that is to say, is the embodiment of natural speech.

Post-structuralist theory (in this case most notably Derrida’s “Writing Before the Letter” in *Of Grammatology*) has of course made short shrift of this doctrine; we now know —or do we?— that the linguistic signifier cannot really give voice to the so-called transcendental signified. But totalizing claims for Derrida finally have no more absolute authority than do any others; on the contrary, when we demystify the dogma of the undecidability of the text put forward in *Of Grammatology*, we find that this dogma too is subject to history. For surely, so I want to suggest here, the argument against the priority of speech to writing is closely connected to the inevitable anxiety as to the very status of “natural” speech in an age like ours that has so thoroughly media-ized the available channels of communication.

Consider the following. When Yeats visited peasant cottages in Galway and Sligo, gathering folk material that might find its way into the fabric of his poetry, when Eliot used the overheard speech of his cleaning woman —what he called “pure Ellen Kellond” (FAC 127)— as the basis for the Cockney monologue of

Lil's malicious friend in "The Game of Chess", the working classes, whether rural or urban, still represented an exotic *other*, an other whose speech might be appropriated into the poetic text in the interest of authenticity. Thus when Eliot produced a poem that contained the speech of a malicious low-class female gossip:

But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.
 You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
 (And her only thirty-one.)
 I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
 It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
 (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.) (ECP 42)

such early readers of *The Waste Land* as F. R. Leavis and F. O. Matthiessen were quick to proclaim Eliot's triumph in capturing the *actual rhythms* of pub talk in 1920s London. And we continue to marvel at what might be called the collage value of the Lil section, the brilliant juxtapositioning of mock mimetic, as in the passage above, with the Biblical rhythms of "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" and the plaintive "Good night ladies", of Ophelia.

Why, then, can't postmodern poets write "like Eliot"? Students frequently ask me this and related questions. Why can't the "Language poets" write like Kafka? Or like Brecht, whose syntax and diction were, it is argued, so marvelously limpid and *natural*, so wholly devoid of "puffed-up benchmarks"? In considering such questions, we might begin by noting that the quest for authentic natural speech belonged to only one branch of Anglo-American Modernism, that, say, Williams and Stein were much less interested in poetry as the reproduction of common speech than in the poem as what Williams called a "machine made out of words". True, Williams will refer now and again to the "rhythmic pace" of his poetry as "the pace of speech" (IWWP 15), even as Stein declares in "Composition as Explanation" that "Beginning again and again is a natural thing" (GSSW 516). But the emphasis in this famous essay as in Stein's "Grammar and Poetry" or Pound's *ABC of Reading* is on what Williams called, with reference to Marianne Moore, "wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts" (IMAG 315-16). Poetry, so Williams suggests, originates in "speech", but "It isn't what [the poet] says that counts as a work of art, it's what he *makes*, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own" (WSE 257). Hugh Kenner, ruminating on this proposition, observes that a characteristic Williams poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow" cannot reasonably be spoken by anyone. We cannot, that is to say, imagine an occasion on which any X should say to any Y "So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens" (60).

But if Williams and Stein did not concur with Eliot's and Yeats's faith in the "return to common speech", it is true that they too regularly referred to *authenticity*, to *the natural*, and in Williams' case, to the *breath*. The rejection of

such criteria for poetry was not to come until the early seventies and has to do with the new location of that entity Wordsworth and Yeats refer to as “the common man”. By 1970 or so, *the common man* or *common woman* emerged, not as a presence to be memorably apprehended in the Scottish highlands like Wordsworth’s Solitary Reaper or down at the village pub like Yeats’s Old Tom, nor was the poet’s contact with the exotic “common man” any longer likely to be the relationship with one’s servants, as in the case of Eliot’s Albert and Lil or, for that matter, Williams’ Elsie. Rather, one’s knowledge of the mythical “rustic” or “working man” is now primarily derived from the source available right in the poet’s living-room or bedroom —which is to say, of course, from television. Consider —and this brings me finally to my title— the modus operandi of the Talk Show, my example here being the Phil Donahue show, although the same points could be made with respect to Oprah Winfrey or any other number of Talk Shows, the formula being almost exactly the same whether the interviewer is male or female, black or white, East Coast or West Coast, and so on.

What sort of authentic speech do we hear and see expressed on *Donahue*? From Monday to Friday, five days a week, for a full hour, Phil Donahue, the all-American clean-cut average guy, performs what looks like a high-wire act as he leaps around the auditorium, recording the comments of his audience members on the topic of the day. Topics are almost always and reassuringly “everyday” and amenable to “normal speech” —for example, premarital and extra-marital sex, impotence, incest, rape, the rights of gay fathers and mothers, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, in-laws, day care, two-career couples, older man/younger woman marriages and the converse, alcoholism, drug abuse, AIDS education in the public schools —the list is all but endless. For each of these topics, Phil Donahue brings in several “experts”— experts falling into two categories: those that have “been there” and those that analyze “having been there.”

Thus, in a “daring” program on incest, the “expert” (this really happened!) is likely to be a woman whose father, a prison warden, forced her to commit incest with him. The father is also on the show as is the pitiful mother. These three principals are sure to be flanked by two “real” experts —in this case, two psychiatrists or therapists who have written about incest and who, as is invariably the case on talk shows, hold so-called opposite points of view on the issue. Or if the topic is drug abuse, the panelists are bound to include former abusers as well as, once again, the proverbial therapists. Significantly, no one *currently* on drugs seems to be alive just as no one on the Incest panel is currently having sexual relations with a young relative. The reason for this omission is simple: the media mechanism cannot permit the disruption that just might take place if Donahue really permitted the natural words to occur in the natural order. Suppose, for example, that a few drunks were brought off the streets and placed on the Donahue stage and suppose they promptly fell asleep or asked for a drink or started singing dirty songs, or threw empty bottles at members of the audience. Suppose, for that matter, that the talk-show guests just sat there and stared at the interviewer. How, is such a case, could the time frame contain its requisite plenitude?

"Every return in poetry", says Eliot, "is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be, a return to common speech". Now let's look more closely at what "common speech" sounds like over the TV channel. To give a specific example: on Friday, 1 April, 1988, the Donahue topic was "Couples Who Consider Their Marriage To Be Over But Continue To Live Together For The Sake Of Their Children Or For Practical Reasons". The author of a book on this edifying subject was present as were three couples who were still living together even though they constantly brought their respective boyfriends or girlfriends into the house. As is usual on *Donahue*, a mock debate was in session, certain viewers expressing the view that such a sham marriage "is a big cop-out", others maintaining that, on the contrary, "In this day and age you don't have to lie about the way you really feel". One wife on the stage expressed the sentiment that "This way I still have my both guys near me... but I only sleep with one of them". This statement, like many other "outrageous" remarks, produced gales of laughter and applause from the audience. Clearly, they were amazed and delighted to see that a woman rather like themselves in appearance could have her cake and eat it too!

Along the way, the men and women who spoke both in favor of and against the living arrangement in question would begin with the clause "I think..." or "I believe..." or "It seems to me that..." The constant reference to "I", coupled with a closeup shot of the speaker would seem to suggest that the Death of the Subject, proclaimed in the more sophisticated intellectual circles, is vastly exaggerated. Here are people of all ages, both sexes, different races, and from all walks of life (with the proviso that they have applied to be guests on Donahue and have been screened as being "appropriate"), who have *strong* opinions about personal feelings. But if one listens carefully, those seemingly contradictory opinions are conveyed in a curiously consistent vocabulary. On *Donahue*, the seven virtues have been reduced to three, all beginning with a *c*: *caring*, *compassionate*, and *candid*. Given a three-*c* attitudinal profile as well as a big retrospective *R* for *regret* ("I now regret that I ever did such a thing!"), one can be forgiven —indeed admired— for almost anything. The gray-haired man on the screen actually committed incest with the unattractive young woman who is his daughter. But he now *regrets* it and, besides, she has managed to develop into a *caring* and *compassionate* young woman. And a woman *candid* enough to tell all about her ordeal in a new best-seller.

All these instances of common speech, warbled into Phil's tenderly waiting microphone, are perhaps best understood as what Jean Baudrillard has called *simulacra* —"models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal". "The territory", as Baudrillard puts it, "no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory" (SIM 2). The media are not, as orthodox Marxism would have it, the neutral instruments whereby the dominant classes maintain their monopoly of oppression, instruments that could, in the "correct" society, be used to educate and improve the masses. On the contrary, it is the central characteristic of television to function as what Baudrillard has called "la parole sans réponse", the unanswerable speech (PCEP 208-209). Which is to

say that the the talk-show process, far from communicating information to the viewer, presents us with the *simulacra* of “direct natural speech”, simulacra to which we react in kind since we are well aware of the fact that the discourse overheard is a one-way circuit.

This relationship of television to its audience is often misunderstood as power play, the manipulation of “us” by “them” —the evil capitalist producers of the show. But if the audience of a national show like *Donahue* is nameless and faceless, if it cannot answer the discourse on the screen, who is really manipulating whom? We can learn that Jim X (this really happened on Donahue!) “has chosen virginity” as a way of life; we even learn that Jim is a first-year medical student at Harvard; what we don’t know —and what no TV show can tell us— is who Jim is.

This late-twentieth century version of “the natural words in the natural order” was nowhere more obvious than in the special broadcast in August of 1988, in which the then-seven Democratic candidates were given the opportunity to make brief footage-segments about themselves and their families. Invariably, each segment opens with the smiling candidate, each in his neutral blue suit, flanked by wife, children and a pet or two, against the backdrop of a “normal” “nice” but nondescript house. Invariably, the sun is shining and there are likely to be autumn leaves (but not too many!) underfoot. The candidate identifies family members by name and provides a “telling” detail here and there: for instance, “This is Johnny. He just passed his driving test”. And then, dues to family values having been paid, the camera quickly removes the family and cuts to a close-up of the candidate’s face.

The teenager’s passing of the driving test is one that interests me, being the perfect synecdoche of the “language really used by men” as it appears on television. The candidate cannot tell “us” —“the nameless and faceless”— that his son is an athlete for that might offend those whose sons are *not* athletes or those who have no sons. But he can’t say that his son is a bookish introvert either. He can’t describe what kind of school the boy goes to without potential offense to someone out there. He can’t describe the fights his son has with his daughter. Or his speeding ticket. Or his experimenting with Speed. Indeed, the more we think about it, the more we realize that the candidate cannot say anything much more specific about his son than that he is now legally driving a car. This is the level of abstraction to which the dream of a common language descends. Actual speech, no longer the exchange of “a man speaking to men”, is emptied of all particularity of reference. The discourse becomes, in Barthean terms, *intransitive*.

What does all this have to do with contemporary poetry? The common-sense answer to this question is that poets are precisely those who, faced with the abstraction and corruption of “mediaspeak” that I have been describing, continue to give voice to individual human feeling. Poetry, by this argument, is the purveyor of the authentic speech that is everywhere threatened by the so-called consciousness industries. As another Philip, this time the poet Philip Levine puts it, it is poetry that “helps ordinary people get through their lives” (DA 78). For “Whatever beauty I see in the natural world, whatever spirit I think is immanent in it, I feel is

also there in people who are themselves part of the natural world" (DA 142). The poet, it seems, is still *a man speaking to men*.

The poetics of a Philip Levine —and Levine is certainly a representative poet of the later twentieth century— thus posits a simple bifurcation between *them* and *us*, between the dreaded *them* who run the country, make the laws we must obey, and control our lives, and the *us* who are sensitive and *human*. Commenting on Philip Levine's poetry in the most recent edition of *Contemporary Poets*, Robert S. Miola writes:

The poetry of Philip Levine is somber, reflective, and honest. It is spare in form, taut in expression, simple in idiom... He employs the image, hard, clean, and concrete, stripped of effusive sentiment, free from intellectual editorials. Levine protests against the evils of the modern world and searches for personal freedom and fulfillment. At its best his poetry, highly personal and nostalgic, is stark, restrained, and powerful. (496-97)

This is a typical comment on a poet who has been extraordinarily successful, as his many prizes (two Guggenheims, 4 NEA fellowships, an American Book Award, a National Book Critics' Circle Award, and so on) testify. "Personal freedom and fulfillment" versus "the evils of the modern world": here is the polarity Levine himself dwells on in a series of interviews published in the *Poets on Poetry* series under the title *Don't Ask*. This remarkable document deserves close attention as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the neo-neo Romantic position on poetry in our time.

Asked by Arthur E. Smith how his poetry relates to politics, Levine replies:

We now exist in the kind of world that Orwell was predicting, and the simple insistence upon accurate language has become a political act. Nothing is more obvious than what our politicians are doing to our language, so that if poets insist on the truth, or on an accurate rendition, or on a faithful use of language, if they for instance insist on an accurate depiction of people's lives as they are actually lived —this is a political act. (13)

Note here the unquestioned assumption that there is such a thing as 'the truth', as "accurate rendition", as a "faithful" account of how people's lives are actually lived. Would that "truth" be significantly different from that put before us day after day by the other Phil, Phil Donahue? Levine avoids this issue, concentrating on the iniquities of *them*. America, he asserts solemnly in an interview with Stanley Plumly and Wayne Dodd, made in Ohio in 1974, is "an immense lie". To grow up in America is to learn that "The past was utter horseshit. The constitution was not the beautiful document; nobody ever listened to it anyway, and the guys who wrote it had slaves" (45). And again, in conversation with Studs Terkel (1977): "The state is our largest enemy. It has, on several occasions, brought us close to destruction, and it may still. And I feel, as a poet, that one of my functions is constantly to remind people of this" (73). What, then, are Levine's own politics? "Anarchism",

he tells Calvin Bedient. Not Communism, for that “seems as ugly as what we offer the world” (90). Anarchism is “an enormously useful belief, judging from what it’s done for me and the way I feel about myself, the way I feel about the people I know... I think it’s an extraordinarily generous, bountiful way to look at the universe. It has to do with the end of ownership, the end of competitiveness, the end of a great deal of things that are ugly” (91).

What I find remarkable here is the relationship of so-called political judgement to “what it’s done for me”, to “the way I feel about myself”. Indeed, despite Levine’s consistent attacks on the corrupt U.S. government, the “state [as] our largest enemy”, and the terrible lies told to our schoolchildren, he himself is not at all dissatisfied with the quality of American life. On the contrary. In a 1979 conversation, Levine is giving his usual rap about the United States being a fraud, “an illusion”, when the interviewer, Tad Prozewicz asks, “Does this mean you have trouble being a good citizen?” To which Levine replies: “No. I’m a good citizen. I love America, the place, the people. Just because I wouldn’t obey my government and go kill gooks doesn’t mean I’m not a valuable person”. (167). And again, “I’ve liked my life in poetry... It’s put me in touch with a lot of marvelous people that I’ve had a chance to meet because I was a poet. And I know a lot of terrific young people. I keep meeting new people because I travel around and give readings...” (106).

How does one relate these “terrific young people” to the “horseshit” which is the United States? Levine is not one to speculate on such matters for, as he tells Studs Terkel, “If someone were going to tell me the meaning of my life, I’d turn away and not listen. I’d rather live it the way I’m living it without understanding it” (81). Here, almost two-hundred years after Wordsworth’s “The Tables Turned”, is the requisite homage to the *natural look*, Wordsworth’s “One impulse from a vernal wood” being reduced to the faint tic of willed ignorance. “You know”, Levine tells Bedient, “abstract ideas are so monumental all the way from Plato to the present. They bore me. Philosophers bore me. I find them the most boring people I’ve ever come across in my life. I would much prefer spending, you know, the afternoon with a bunch of jockeys or car mechanics than with philosophers” (105-06). As for why he doesn’t write any criticism, Levine responds, “I’m a poet. If we need that shit, you [the interviewer, Tad Prozewicz] spend your time writing it. I’m a writer and if I’m going to do it I’m going to try to do it well, and it’ll take time away from my real work” (162).

Criticism, it seems, is not really *writing*. Philosophy is not really *writing*. Writing refers exclusively to the poetic act, the act of externalizing the deep-seated, unique feelings of Phil Levine, poet and spokesman of the way “people” naturally feel in the natural world. In this scheme of things, language itself becomes a mere distraction. Asked by Bedient whether he is trying to create a “language of revelation”, Levine replies:

I don’t know if I’m trying to create a language. I’ve never really thought about that. In a curious way, I’m not much interested in language. In my

ideal poem, no words are noticed. You look through them into a vision of...
just see the people, the place... (101; ellipsis is Bedient's)

The desire to create a poetry without words, at least not words that anyone might "notice": the resulting "transparency" is likely to look like this:

TO CIPRIANO, IN THE WIND

Where did your words go,
Cipriano, spoken to me 38 years
ago in the back of Peerless Cleaners,
where raised on a little wooden platform
you bowed to the hissing press
and under the glaring bulb the scars
across your shoulders — "a gift
of my country" — gleamed like old wood.
"Dignidad", you said into my boy's
wide eyes, "without is no riches".
And Ferrente, the dapper Sicilian
coatmaker, laughed. What could
a pants presser know of dignity?
That was the winter of '41, it
would take my brother off to war,
where you had come from, it would
bring great snowfalls, graying
in the streets, and the news of death
racing through the halls of my school.

And so it goes on, for another thirty-five short free-verse lines, the poet recalling the "simple" dignity of the little Sicilian pants presser, Cipriano Mera, whose faith in the renewal of life ("Spring, spring, it always comes after") has evidently seen the poet through the bitter winter when his cousins died on the Russian front", the winter when Sam Baghosian returned "with bayonet wounds in both legs" to "eat/the stale bread of victory" (ROSE, 60-61).

"To Cipriano" fulfills with a vengeance Eliot's dictum that poetic speech must be so "natural" "that the listener or reader can say 'that is how I should talk if I could talk poetry'. Levine really does talk "like everyone else", which is to say, that he alternates, as people do in "normal" conversation, between the literalism of "What could / a pants presser know of dignity?" or "That was the winter of '41", and the cliché descriptions of "the hissing press", "the glaring bulb", the scars that "gleamed like old wood", the snowfalls "graying / in the streets", the "news of death / racing through the halls of my school". "Where did your words go, / Cipriano?" asks the poet, a rhetorical question if ever there was since he knows exactly, not only where dear old crusty Cipriano's words went but who put them in his mouth. Indeed, when the poem concludes with the lines, "Enter my dreams

or my life, Cipriano, come back / out of the wind”, the reader can take comfort in the thought of Mission Accomplished: Cipriano, the stereotype of Good Ol’ Sicilian Boy!, the type we’ve all loved to meet at Peerless (get the irony?) Cleaners, can come back out the wind because of course he has never left.

To say that language in a poem like this one is “transparent”, that the words are to be “looked through”, is not quite accurate. We *see through* such language in the sense that we react to each unit with a stock response. “That was the winter of ‘41, it / would take my brother off to war” —oh yes, we know what that was all about. Indeed, Levine’s celebrated *honesty*, the authenticity of his “spare, taut idiom”, has to do less with what Yeats called “the presence of a man, thinking and feeling”, than with the representations of such presence one meets in the world of *them*— the world of the politicians and media people the sensitive poet supposedly abhors. Cipriano, the pants presser and Ferrente, “the dapper Sicilian / coatmaker” are true sentimental Sitcom figures, even as the poet’s “sensitive” memories of World War II have the inflections of *The World at War* or similar documentaries. But then why should it be otherwise, the “common speech”, as Levine receives it, always already bearing the imprint of the media circuits through which it is processed. As we read “To Cipriano”, we can easily visualize the screen version, beginning with the shot of the teen-age boy shyly chatting with the wise old man, and then cutting to scenes of Bataan, the allied troops liberating the Sicily Cipriano comes from, and so on.

This, then is the situation of poetry —Establishment poetry— in the 1970s and 80s, the situation against which the Radical Poetries which are our subject here have positioned themselves. The cult of the *natural voice* —what Charles Bernstein calls, with reference to Olson, “the *phallacy* of the heroic stance” (CD 332)— with its masculinist allegory of language as the stride of a man and its idealization of voice as the locus of authority— is increasingly giving way to a poetry that, as Bernstein says of Ron Silliman, “emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed, everywhere circumscribed by grammar & syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, organized, & so an artifice, artifact— monadic, solipsistic, homemade, manufactured, mechanized, formulaic, willful” (CD 40-41). This catalogue is purposely bombastic so as to emphasize what has become an article of faith for Language Poetry: “Every phrase I write, every juxtaposition I make, is a manifestation of using a full-blown language: full of possibilities of meaning & impossibilities of meaning” (CD 46). And again, “there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it” (CD 49).

Here is the opposite pole from Levine’s “In my ideal poem no words are noticed”. The emphasis on the word rather than on the object behind it or the vision beyond it has had startling consequences. For one thing, the Image as “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound’s phrase), the Image as “vector” (Olson’s), no longer has the authority it had for Modernist poets. Images, after all, are what dominate the video screen, the billboard, the newspaper page. Our own poetic dominant, to use Roman Jakobson’s phrase, is thus, not

Image but Syntax: the creation of a word order (line order, sentence order) that disrupts the normal channels of communication, forcing us to become aware of the role of language, not as a conduit, but as the site and production of meaning.

Here Robert Creeley is a pivotal figure. Many readers who admired the Creeley of the fifties —a Creeley, so it seemed squarely in the Williams mode, became uneasy when Creeley published *Pieces* (1969) and *A Day Book* (1972). Thus M. L. Rosenthal, in what was to become a rather notorious review of the latter for *Parnassus*, complained that "there are too many passages... done either in telegraphese or in a comma-spiked, anti-idiomatic style that befuddles one's memory of the English tongue". For, "Few effects are as satisfying as the assimilation of natural speech into a powerful and melodic poem" (211-212). Comparing Creeley's "The Edge" ("Place it, / make the space / of it") to its parent text, Williams' "Love Song" ("I lie here thinking of you"), Rosenthal remarks on Williams' "rich", "fullbodied" and "active imag[ery]", imagery which "The Creeley poem echoes... but makes... almost static and reduces the emotion to an abstraction. Without Williams' phrasing— 'yellow', "stain of love", "upon the world", "selvage"— it would have neither vigor nor concrete reference" (212).

But perhaps "natural speech", "active imagery", "vigor", and "concrete reference" are not what the Creeley of *Pieces* is after. Consider the opening section of "Again":

One more day gone,
done, found in
the form of days.

It began, it
ended— was
forward, backward,

slow, fast a
sun shone, clouds,
high in the air I was

for awhile with others,
then came down
on the ground again.

No moon. A room in
a hotel— to begin
again. (423)

There is no use trying to read such a poem as a confessional lyric ("Here's what happened to me and how it made me feel..."). Creeley's is less a form of witnessing that of paragram, which is to say, following Leon S. Roudiez, that "its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits" (Quoted in McCaffery, NI 63). "The percolation of the word through the paragram", says

Steve McCaffery, “contaminates the notion of an ideal, unitary meaning and thereby counters the supposition that words can ‘fix’ or stabilize in closure” (NI 63).

“One more day gone, / done, found in / the form of days”: there’s a sentence you are sure never to hear on *Donahue*, a sentence whose “content” is not extractable from its form. The “One”, to begin with, is embedded in both “gone” and “done” on either side of the first line break so that we can virtually *see* the “day” erode before our eyes. But what is “done” is also “found” —the *o* and *n* reappear together with the *d* of *day* to call up the “form of days” once more; indeed, the paragram of “*form of*” enacts the cycle of the title “Again”. Line 4, “It began, it”, is another version of this circular process, but the reassurance of cyclicity finds itself challenged by the equally prominent dialectic of “forward, backward, / slow, fast... high... down”. In this context, “No moon. A room in” is almost a palindrome, a “room” being what one has when there is “No moon”. Yet the “room in / a hotel” is a transit station, a preparation (note the rhyme of “ground” in line 12 with “found” in line 2 above) “to begin again”. Indeed, the line endings in the final tercet make up a three-step unit —“in”, “begin”, “again”— *in* being the quality that stubbornly inheres in Creeley’s “beginning again and again”.

“The paragram”, writes McCaffery, is “that aspect of language which *escapes* all discourse” (NI 64). Discourse of the sort we meet in lines like “And Ferrente, the dapper Sicilian / coatmaker, laughed. What could / a pants presser know of dignity?” Given the overproduction of such instrumental discourses in late-twentieth century America, with its glut of junk mail, advertising brochures, beepers, bumper stickers, telephone answering-machine messages, and especially its increasing video coercion (on cross-country flights, it is now customary to show the preview of the film-to-be-shown with the sound on in the entire cabin, and this is only the beginning!), poetry (at least in the industrially advanced countries, the situation in, say, Eastern Europe or Latin America being very different) is coming to see its role as the production of what we might call an alternate language system. Hence the name, pretentious but essentially accurate, Language Poetry—a label that, like all group labels, names of *-isms*, and so on, will probably have a limited life-span as the designation of a specific poetic school, even as it will, paradoxically, become more significant as we begin to see it as part of a larger movement that extends from Zukofsky and Cage in the fifties to such contemporary performance artists as Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray.

In this broader sense, Language Poetry shows no signs of going away, despite the hostility and scorn of its very vocal enemies. On the contrary, the venom of the attackers suggests, at least to me, that there is something worth attacking. Let me conclude with two recent examples:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (1) <i>My morphemes
mourned events</i> | I will not despair; my hope is 1) to rise daily before seven, 5) to avoid idleness. There cannot be ups without downs. But they don't track, they mock. My relief at having finally written down that |
|--|---|

thought is enormous— now I can forget about it; but it is not forgetfulness that takes its place as I begin to think of other things. I don't know what prompts this —the assertion of world (order) desired in a dream— but I remember the pleasure with which my mother made her "time-and-motion studies" when she never wasted a trip upstairs by ascending empty-handed. The desire for immortality is accompanied by a sense of density. Form, then be expressive. As for we who "love to be astonished", consciousness is durable in poetry. My heart takes occupancy. I chew and my eyeballs jiggle.

Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, p. 98

(2) Posit gaze level diminish lamp and asleep (selv) cannot see

MoheganToForceImmanenceShotStepSeeShowerFiftyTree

UpConcatenationLessonLittleAKantianEmpiricalMaoris

HumTemporal-spatioLostAreLifeAbstractSoRemote Possess

ReddenBorderViewHaloPastApparitionOpenMostNotion is

blue glare(essence)cow bed leg extinct draw scribe sideup
even blue(A)ash-tree fleece comfort(B)draw scribe upside

Susan Howe, from *Articulations of Sound Forms in Time*, unpaginated.

Both these extracts come from long poetic sequences published in 1987; both are by women in their mid-forties, who are both, but Howe less obviously than Hejinian, known as Language poets. But there the resemblance ends. Hejinian's prose text comes from the expanded version (1987) of *My Life*, the poet's "autobiography", in which a series of permutating phrases appears in the form of headnotes in a blank square, the text itself alligned along two of its four sides and then continuing with normal justified margins. Like Creeley's "One more day gone, / done, found in," "*My morphemes mourned events*" functions paragrammically, the *mour-* of *mourned* being contained in *My morphemes*, even as *mourned* may be either a verb (in which case, the construction is subject-verb-object) or a past participle used adjectivally.

The narrative itself opens straightforwardly enough with an expression of purpose: "I will not despair; my hope is 1) to rise daily before seven, 5) to avoid idleness." It sounds rather like *Gatsby*, except that we have no idea to what, specifically, the poet is referring or why 5) should follow 1). True, the next sentence with its proverbial *Readers' Digest* wisdom, "There cannot be ups without downs", provides us with a peg to hang on to: we all know what it "says". But this sentence is immediately followed by "But they don't track, they mock". Who are

“they”? The “ups and downs”? Does Hejinian mean that one’s ups and downs leave no tracks? If not, how do they “mock” us? We only know that “My relief at having finally written down that thought is enormous.”

Hejinian characteristically uses what seem to be “normal” sentences, only to deflate their forward movement by introducing non-sentences into their midst. In the sentence “Form, then be expressive”, for example, *form* can be construed as a noun (e.g., “If you want to achieve form, then be expressive”) or a verb (“First form what you want to say, then be expressive”). Or perhaps a past participle (“Once formed, you can then be expressive”). And there are many other possibilities. But even in the case of the “normal” sentences, the words placed in the appropriate grammatical slots often don’t make “sense”, at least not in any traditional way. For example, “The desire for immortality is accompanied by a sense of density”. That sounds reasonable but what does it mean? Or again, “My heart takes occupancy. I chew and my eyeballs jiggle”. Does that follow? And how are we to take the conjunction “and”?

Throughout this very funny text, “girlish” resolutions (“my hope is...”; “My relief at having finally...”; “My heart takes occupancy”) shift without notice to such “wise” assertions as “consciousness is durable in poetry” —assertions that sound like faint echoes of the sort of thing people say on *Donahue*. Someone, for example, might raise her hand and say, “There cannot be ups without downs”. But in *My Life*, that truism is suddenly taken literally, the poet telling us about her mother, who “never wasted a trip upstairs by ascending empty-handed”. And the embedding of the enigmatic “As for we who ‘love to be astonished’”, (who are “we”?), a “headphrase” that reappears in section after section, further reminds us that Hejinian’s is not a stream-of-consciousness account of her girlhood but a highly formalized, quasi-musical composition, indeed a triumph of artifice.

Susan Howe’s *Articulations of Sound Forms in Time*, from which the second passage above is taken, draws its materials, not, as in Hejinian’s case, from the poet’s personal life, but from historical and literary documents, from archives and letters. The story of the Reverend Hope Atherton, who, having been separated from the Hatfield militia he was accompanying on an Indian raid in 1676, surrendered himself to the Indians only to have them reject him in fear, “thinking [he] was the Englishman’s God” (see frontispiece and Howe’s manuscript note), becomes the subject of the poet’s meditation on power and marginality and, by implication, on the marginality of the woman poet (Howe plays variations on the name *Hope*, which is, of course, usually a woman’s name) in America.

In one sense, then, Howe’s is a more “referential” text than Hejinian’s *My Life*, but its actual “articulations of sound forms” is, if anything, even more fragmented. The poem welds together a series of harsh-sounding nouns and verbs, all filler (function words, conjunctions, prepositions) being cast out, so as to produce the chant-like rhythm of

ReddenBorderViewHaloPastApparationOpenMostNotion is

where the italicized copula is startling in its disruption of the line's curious drumbeat. First-person reference is wholly deleted, the narrative voice being that of the chronicle, but a chronicle in shards or fragments, as if retrieved from a fire or flood and collaged together with other particles. In this context, the word often points in two directions: in line 1, for example, it is not clear whether the "gaze" or the "lamp" is said to diminish; again, the person "asleep" may be Atherton or the Mohegans or we as readers whose "selv" is also a reduced particle. In line 2, the phrase "ShotStepSeeShowerFiftyTree" so brutally telescopes events that the vague echo of a number, 53, the paragram pointing ahead to the "(A)ash-tree" of the final line.

The next four lines seem to describe Atherton's experience with the Mohegans but each of the words annexed in the linear chain without a space between them (e.g. "ToForceImmanence") is charged with a variety of meanings. We can only say that the stanza refers to the terrible conflict brought on by the "SoRemotePossess" of the Colonialist settlers and their priest. Indeed, "SoRemotePossess" works to "ReddenBorderView" —greed we might say, leads to bloodshed. The final couplet conveys a catalogue of jumbled impressions, most probably the impressions of Atherton on his journey back to "civilization", whose "sideup" finally reveals itself to be "upside". But then again, these two isolated words —*sideup/upside*— also refer to the "scribe" who "draws" the picture for us. A scribe whose "articulations" of "sound forms" change in the time-course of the poem.

"Posit gaze level diminish lamp and asleep(selv)cannot see": does anyone talk this way? Is this what Yeats called "the syntax and vocabulary of common personal speech"? Not, certainly, as that common personal speech comes over to us on the airwaves. Imagine a segment of *Donahue* in which the Reverend Atherton is trying to explain his motivations at the time of the skirmish with the Mohegans. "If you ask me, Reverend", says the man in the double-knit suit, "you had no business joining an army in the first place. You're supposed to be a Man of God". "I disagree", says the lady in the red across the way, "I think it was a very caring and compassionate thing to do".

Both parties, no doubt are right. Just as both of them are wrong. Poetry, in any case, has moved elsewhere.