Journal of American Studies of Turkey
4 (1996) : 3-13.

Postmodern Language-centered Writing and the Question of Ideology: A Polish Perspective

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Many postmodern writers who denounce and renounce established cultural and artistic canons, on aesthetic as well as ideological grounds, point out that literature does more than solely reflect repressive societal conditions, and that, in fact, at various stages in the development of modern civilization, works of literature significantly contributed to the creation of such conditions, by giving artistic legitimacy to the dominant worldview. The most often quoted example of this phenomenon is the way in which nineteenth-century realistic fiction promoted the rationalistic/scientistic worldview intrinsic to the ideology of capitalism.

Today, such confluence of politics and poetics is especially evident in those postmodern texts which focus attention on their own medium and investigate their condition as constructed artifacts, written by authors recognizing the mutually constitutive character of language and social relationships. Significantly, aesthetic and ideological implications of contemporary language-centered literature do not merely form an interpretive issue, but also a practical concern for many of the writers themselves. Developing their rule-of-thumb theories of writing, these writers often think in terms of ideology and politics. To illustrate this point, I refer in this article to the theoretical/polemical writings of some radically innovative, oppositional authors associated with American postmodernism who, apart from being creative writers, have engaged extensively in debates about what one of them has called "the politics of language" (Sukenick, "Eight Digressions"). Then, in the second part of the article, I point to certain striking similarities and equally striking differences between postmodern American language-centered literature and the Polish language-centered poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, in the belief that this has ramifications for the conceptualization of postmodernism as a purely American, and more generally Western, trend.

Ronald Sukenick, a novelist and one of the chief spokesmen for the new fiction in America, published his first novel,*Up,* in 1968, the year in which waves of social unrest swept not only through the United States but also through several European countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Writing from the inside of the

postmodern movement, he has practiced writers', or "intellectual" (as opposed to academic), criticism which, although not informed by any particular ideology, regards writing from the vantage of ideological preconception based on values the writer wishes to promote. As a storyteller, he admits, he has tried to "break down standard form in fiction in order to reach beyond literary artifice to actual experience" ("Experiment and Experience: My Life in Fiction" 15). Like Sukenick, Charles Bernstein explicitly states that he is "interested in understanding art ideologically, that is, in terms of social considerations," believing that "rather than thinking of individual artists and what they have in their minds to do, it may be more valuable to think of how artworks reflect struggles and conditions that exist in the society or culture as a whole" ("Socialist Realism or Real Socialism?" 414-415). As a leading member of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movementa movement which, as Marjorie Perloff points out, "arose as an essentially Marxist critique of contemporary American capitalist society on behalf of young poets who came of age in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate" ("The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties" 232)--Bernstein colors his outstanding theoretical essays with the rhetoric of what he calls "rehermeneuticized" Marxism (to distinguish such criticism, he insists, from "infantile forms of Marxist thought" ["Three or Four Things I Know about Him" 20]).

The value of Sukenick's and Bernstein's polemical writings lies not only in the pointedness of their observations and the audacity of their propositions, but also in their ability to demonstrate, through their use of particular modes of analytical discourse, that, as the latter argues, "style and form are as ideological as content and interpretation" ("Living Tissue/Dead Ideas" 368). Regarding writing as a form of critical thought commensurable with, and in many ways superior to, such conventional knowledge-producing methods as scientific rationality, these two authors have been engaged in investigating firstly, how language reflects and influences the ways in which we see as well as understand physical and social reality; and, secondly, how the form of discourse affects what can be said within it. What particularly interests them is, on the one hand, how literature has been used to promote and officialize the modern worldview, and; on the other, whether writing can be used today to question and undermine the official doctrines of modernity, and thus lead to radical transformations of contemporary reality in its social, cultural, and artistic dimensions.

That literature can play an active role in the social struggle was spectacularly exemplified by the battle between the academic and the Beat poets at the beginning of the 1960s. As Sukenick observes, out of that battle a new vocabulary, new rhythms, new forms, and new models of writing emerged; a whole new rhetoric of rebellion that, he notes, "helped prepare and support the liberation movements of the sixties" ("Eight Digressions on the Politics of Language" 51). During that decade, many writers became actively involved in the project of making people aware of the appearance in contemporary American society of what Raymond

Federman, another leading exponent of the new fiction's language-centered poetics, calls "the linguistic gap created by the disarticulation of the official discourse in its relation with the individual" ("Self-Reflexive Fiction or How to Get Rid of It" 25). One important manifestation of this project has been the revival of "self-reflexiveness" in postmodern fiction, which, Federman explains,

> offers texts that are analogous to language, that reflect upon their own movement, and that function between social reality and subjectivity in order to undermine the illusory relationship between the two. It is no longer a question of representing or explaining or justifying American reality, but a question of denouncing the vehicle that expressed and represented that reality: discursive language and the traditional form of the novel. In other words, the New Fiction writers confront their own writing, insert themselves inside their own texts in order to question the very act of using language to write fiction, even at the risk of alienating the reader. ("Self Reflexive Fiction" 32)

Federman's description makes clear that, in this fiction, "self-reflexiveness" is a way of promoting a new kind of self-consciousness, which is different from the self-consciousness of the moderns in that emphasis is shifted from the problematics of the self to that of consciousness as such--not *self*-consciousness but self-*consciousness*.

Many of today's innovative writers, such as Sukenick, Federman, and Bernstein, point out, give priority to, the mapping of consciousness--no longer understood as the central intelligence in which all meaning takes origin, but as a product of man's interaction with the world--in order to find out through writing how the world and consciousness are constituted by language, the medium and substance (or content) of thought. By introspecting and reflecting upon the processes through which their own works are constructed as word-systems, they want to make the reader aware of the linguistic texture of all experience--the experience of writing, of reading, and of living in the world.

In an attempt to chart the role of language in mediating human knowledge of the world and of consciousness, these postmodernists often replace expository logic with free-associative, nondiscursive thinking. As a result, rather than reflecting upon a given ideology or system of thought, their texts--both creative and critical--reflect, as Sukenick puts it, "the architecture of consciousness thinking and feeling as it processes experience" ("Art and the Underground" xviii). Renouncing the rational discursiveness characteristic of earlier literature, they employ compositional strategies which, instead of insisting on closure and unification, aim at opening up the discourse to enable different modes, styles, and vocabularies which the writer may decide to bring into the text to crisscross and interact in a dialogic or polylogic, rather than monologic, manner. They reject the principle of a directional, unifunctional and hierarchialized ordering of the work's constitutive elements, in favor of borrowing, appropriating, mimicking, quoting, and plagiarizing language from other written sources and from the accumulating "text" of the culture. They demonstrate in this way that there is no cardinal principle

which a writer can, or should, use to structure discourse, just as there is no ready-made formula that man can use to structure experience. By acknowledging this fact, they try to restore to literature the sense of the dialectical nature of cognition. Numerous examples of this approach can be found in Bernstein's *Content's Dream*, Sukenick's *In Form*, and Federman's *Critifiction*, that are collections of essays distinguished by formal and linguistic inventiveness.

While bringing together different modes and styles of writing, and combining them into one multidiscourse "hypertext" (which increasingly blurs the distinction between fiction and poetry on the one hand, and fiction and criticism on the other), these writers' textual strategies--such as, for example, Bernstein's "dysraphism" (a medical term which means disfunctional fusion, or mis-seaming, of embryonic parts ["Blood on the Cutting Room Floor" 359])-- are effective ways of exposing the constructedness of discourse. This effect is often achieved by, as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet and prose writer Ron Silliman observes, "calling attention to the stitching of tropes in what ostensibly is without seams" ("New Prose, New Prose Poem" 165). In other words, by exhibiting the forms and structures in which writing occurs, the writer allows the reader to see the seams at the same time as experiencing the product of the (mis)"seaming," on the one hand; while, on the other, s/he foregrounds language "in its autonomous (dis)functioning, freed from its obligations to express and to represent," to use Tzvetan Todorov's words (qtd. in Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy 3).

Such referential "disfunctioning" of language might appear to inevitably lead to "the death of the referent" and, in consequence, meaninglessness. However, by resorting to and relying on undecidability, indeterminacy, doubt, hesitation, awkwardness and decenteredness, and by offering direct access to the multiple powers and scope of reference, the writer creates unlimited possibilities for meaning-generation. The kind of polyvalent language s/he employs does not fix words in one-to-one relations to "objects," but makes meaning a totally relational category dependent on the reader's interaction with the text, on his/her active participation in the constitution of the text's meaning.

Similar to the "disfunctioning" of language at the semantic level, a substantial amount of postmodern language-centered writing ostentatiously violates the rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation, prosody, and other normal language habits in order to demonstrate that, as Bernstein contends, "experience is not inextricably linked to representation, normative syntax, images, but rather, the other way around, is a synthetic, generative activity" ("Semblance" 35). That is why, he observes, "'bad grammar' can speak more truthfully than correct grammar" ("Three or Four Things" 29). The point, of course, is not to deny that language is circumscribed by grammar and rule-governed, but, rather, to become aware of the constitutive character of all the conventions that we use to structure experience in verbal language. As Bernstein remarks, "it is by and through structurings that the world gets revealed; they cannot . . . be avoided. But there is no given (set of)

structure(s) for all cases; they must always be generated [(re)discovered anew]" ("Thought's Measure" 73).

This also means acknowledging the fact that, as the medium of writing, language contributes to, or participates in, the generation of meaning, not only semantically and syntactically, but also concretely, as sound and as shape. Thus, in many language-centered texts which foreground the constructedness of their medium, "the outer structure or parameter, or the method by which [the] work is generated, is made visible, for example by its 'typographicity,' or audible, for instance by its 'syntaxophony,' or both," as Bernstein puts it ("Thought's Measure" 73).

The kind of language-centered writing described here meets with much suspicion and outright hostility on the part of readers and critics (not to mention publishers), who frequently accuse the highly self-conscious postmodern literary radicals of artistic narcissism, hermeticism, unreadability, and art-for-art's-sake postures, as well as of social indifference, and, generally speaking, a detachment from reality. But this criticism seems misguided, for, while many of these writers renounce conventional realism (with its insistence on the totalization and unification of the represented worldview), they do not do so in order to indulge in formalist games played with a language stripped of reference. Rather, showing that such realism is in itself an elaborate formalist game disguised as the most "natural" literary mode for dealing with social reality, they want to go beyond limitations and simplifications in order to reattach writing to the concerns of daily life. The social, and, quite simply, human value of writing which attempts to return to reality, by rejecting conventional, received forms of expression which mediate in the process of converting experience into a literary work, resides in the concreteness of the experience that the text makes available, and, as Bernstein explains, in such writing's "possibilities for relationship." He observes:

> Language is commonness in being, through which we see & make sense of & value. Its exploration is the exploration of the human common ground. The move from purely descriptive, outward directive, writing toward writing centered on its wordness, its physicality, its haecceity [thisness] is, in its impulse, an investigation of human self-sameness, of the place of our connection: in the world, in the word, in ourselves. ("Three or Four Things" 32)

By investigating the intrinsic connection that exists between writing and thinking, and between language and knowledge, language-centered literature clearly becomes involved in producing and conveying ideas; however, as Bernstein notes, "not the ideas referred to . . . but the ideas produced by the mode of discourse" ("Living Tissue" 368). Language-centered writing's "ideological" character in a way accounts for the resistance with which it meets; for, ideology, like rhetoric, is frequently used as a pejorative term denoting "false consciousness." Yet as Bernstein argues, such prejudice is unwarranted because all writing is necessarily ideological, although not in the political but, rather, in the epistemological sense. He explains: "There's no such thing as 'phenomena itself' apart from ideology. Ideology . . . has more the status of substance than do so-called objects, because it is the system through which we constitute objects" ("Socialist Realism" 417). That

is why ideology should be regarded as intrinsic to knowledge and understanding, its role in the constitution of what we experience and come to know as reality being perhaps even more fundamental than that of perception.

In this sense, then, the important question no longer is whether ideas are the prerequisite or the product of perception, but how particular ideologies, particular systems through which we constitute reality, interpose themselves between the world and consciousness, thus defining the parameters of individual experience and social communication. All ideologies, Bernstein points out, are constituted by and in language, for "there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it" ("Stray Straws and Straw Men" 49). Consequently, since, as he observes, "it is natural that there are modes, but there is no natural mode" ("Stray Straws" 49), all ideologies have the same ontological status. What makes them different is how they employ language in the construction and formulation of a discourse which articulates a given body of ideas. What also makes them different is their awareness of, or readiness to acknowledge, the fact that they are interest-guided and language-determined arbitrary constructs.

As Bernstein notes, in an attempt to totalize experience by devising a universal scheme into which all phenomena fit, bourgeois ideology develops a universal language and universal modes of discourse--epitomized by the novel of social realism--which serve to perpetuate the view that ideas, like objects, can be "caught and held," that is, adequately portrayed in language. This "ideational mimesis" stands for the conviction that language will obediently serve humankind as a tool for the description of the world and his/her ideas about reality, thus securing his/her control of natural and social phenomena as well as of his/her own psyche. The imposition upon discourse of rationalistic, or bourgeois, rhetoric is, as Bernstein points out, "reflected by the historical movement toward uniform spelling and grammar, with an ideology that emphasizes nonidiosyncratic, smooth transition, elimination of awkwardness, &c,--anything that might concentrate attention on the language itself" ("Three or Four Things" 27).

The results of the word-effacing strategies of traditional writing are clearly visible in much of contemporary popular literature which, as Sukenick observes, is written in

> a language and form that is standardized so that it can be merchandised to the largest number of people, that is hypnotic and diverting, drawing attention away from ordinary experience and into an anesthetic formula that is familiar and reassuring. Plot, character, verisimilitude, and U.S. Standard English, vendable to film companies and paperback houses which is where the big audience is, and the big money. ("Eight Digressions" 55)

From the point of view of the postmodern writer, the passive eagerness with which the public consumes such homogenized and pasteurized experience, packaged in prefabricated forms, clearly testifies to the lobotomizing effect on society of what in Marxist terms could be called language and literature in the capitalist stage of development. Obviously, then, the postmodern project of restoring the severed link

between literature and reality must involve in the first place an attempt to take language out of the service of the establishment and make it again a communality, a public domain. By trying to do so, postmodern literature not only redeems its own authority as art, but, more importantly, also becomes part of the broader social struggle.

Writers are particularly well-prepared to carry on this struggle. For, although everybody is equally affected by the Establishment's politics of language, writers, or at least some of them, both are more acutely aware of this fact and have a much stronger, "professional," sense of responsibility for counteracting the threat that the media, propaganda, clichs, the "literary," the brainwash of politics, and the mass market pose to experience by manipulating and abusing language. As Sukenick asserts, we all live in language, but "only writers are free--only they know how to move into a more and more spacious syntax" ("Thirteen Digressions" 32-33).

The statement above of course sounds like a platitude, but its recontextualization by a Marxist poet such as Bernstein raises the question of whether language-centered writing and criticism are indeed postmodernism's unique response in our times, in the field of language and linguistic arts, to the excesses of capitalism. Reading the intrinsically demystifying and oppositional, or "countercultural," works of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and such "surfictionists" as Sukenick and Federman, I discover telling similarities between the historical context out of which their works grew and the sociopolitical conditions which led to the development of Polish culture since the Second World War. Could this possibly have implications for our understanding of postmodernism as a genuinely American, or Western, phenomenon?

For one thing, the term "postmodernism" is only beginning to acquire currency in Poland, and then, mostly among art critics writing about Western art. As a literary category, "postmodernism" is practically meaningless, largely because the term relies so strongly on a referential connection to modernism, another term which was never appropriated by Polish literary criticism. Yet, it is a fact that sociocultural revolutions of the kind that America experienced in the 1960s have almost become a Polish specialty (i.e., mass protests against the communist system in 1956, 1970, 1976, and 1980), which suggests that one could expect some typically "postmodern" phenomena to occur in Polish culture despite the political, economic and social differences between Poland and America.

Thomas Jefferson said that liberty to be preserved requires a revolution every twenty years. In Poland, the incompleteness, or restrictedness, of freedom under communism led to the occurrence of outbreaks of social discontent at even shorter intervals. Significantly, under communism such protests were sparked not only by political and economic oppressions, but also by cultural ones.

In 1949 the communist regime that had been installed established an ideologized culture by declaring that socialist realism was the only mode through which art could render itself socially useful. However, in 1956, the year of the Hungarian uprising, violent workers' demonstrations in the Polish city of Poznan initiated a de-Stalinization of the system that led to a liberalization of the government's cultural policies. Thus, socialist realism was no longer the only sanctioned style; and, although still not allowed to criticize the official ideology, art could at last address other issues, including those concerning its own nature, without being accused of social irresponsibility and subversiveness. Some artists uncritically indulged in the new freedom to develop aestheticist attitudes, and others began to investigate art's own nature and its relation to ideas and experience. Self-reflexiveness became the hallmark of the poetry and fiction of the so-called "Generation of '56."

Yet, after a decade of political stability, social minimalism, and aesthetic formalism, the tide of public discontent began to rise again. Perhaps it was merely a historical coincidence (although I do not think so) that in 1968, the year in which anti-Establishment sentiments reached their climax in America and France in violent demonstrations and clashes with the police, similar events took place in Poland, not to mention the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia. In March of that year what initially seemed like a minor incident triggered off a wave of student protest which swept through all major cities in Poland. The incident in question was the government's decision to cancel the performance of a play by Poland's greatest Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz, because the new production subtly underscored certain episodes from the history of Polish-Russian relations in the nineteenth century, in a way suggesting parallels between the past and the present--Czarist Russia now being replaced by the Soviet Union. The authorities' reaction was not only the start of a widespread use of violence against demonstrators, but also a mudslinging campaign in the state-controlled media. One day one was clubbed and arrested for showing opposition to the encroachments of ideology into culture; the next day one read in the newspaper about hooligans and Zionist agents trying to subvert social order by breaking shop windows, burning garbage cans, and throwing stones at the police. The effect was like that of pouring oil on the flames: demonstrations only increased in scale and violence. Holding up burning newspapers, young people shouted on the streets of Polish cities: "The press lies!"

"Law and order" were restored soon but the newly aroused awareness of the impositions of ideology could not be wiped out. The direct outcome was an outpouring in the following years of literary works which submitted to systematic scrutiny the institutionalized, fetishistic language of the mass media and the so-called "propaganda of success." The authors of those demystifying works were soon identified as a movement, which came to be known as the New Wave and the Generation of '68. Looking for a positive tradition to which they could refer, these New Wave writers discovered important precursors in the so-called "linguistic" poets from the Generation of '56. Their generically hybrid works offered models of writing that were inherently anti-conventional, nonconformist, or even anarchistic

in the rejection of codified language and established writing practices. The compositional strategies, stylistic devices, and formal solutions used by those "linguists" called attention to language not as the medium but as the content of writing, not as a tool for describing experience but as a constitutive element of experience.

The experiential thrust of their poetry manifested itself in the extreme empiricism of its referential content. Essentially narrative in character, "linguistic" poems were often composed of verbal chunks of actual reality picked up by the writer and quoted verbatim in the text, without any "poetic" processing. They were "slices of life" in the form of overheard conversations or anecdotes, newspaper clippings, fragments of TV and radio announcements, popular slogans, stories remembered from childhood, and other linguistic trivia that constitute the quotidian experience of contemporary urbanites.

The linguistic character of this poetry was also connected with the poets' experimental--almost in the scientific sense--approach to language as a system of signs inseparable from the system of thought which language reflects and determines. For example, Miron Bialoszewski, one of the older poets studying the relation of common sense to common language, demonstrated that both falsify experience by reducing the most diverse phenomena to a set of logical, absolute, and universal formulas that know no exception. Disguising his epistemological skepticism as naivety, he applied in his works the rules of grammar and poetic diction with relentless consistency, and exhibited the products of his ostensibly uncritical, naive fidelity to the logic of cognitive empiricism and literary orthodoxy. Predictably, the effect of his approach was a poetry full of deformed, mutilated words, phrases and sentences--a poetry that resembled a child's language in all lexical, semantic, and syntactic disintegrations. Relying exclusively on the principle of analogy, he derived outrageous lexical and syntactic formations which in their totalizing application of grammatical rules contradicted all notions of logic and style.

The result, quite obviously, was frequently very comic, but the point was not merely to entertain the reader by poking fun at the imperfectness of language, at its helplessness in the face of the richness of phenomena which it tries but so often fails to name and catalog. In the first place, by deriving false analogies and etymologies, inventing grotesque neologisms, and delexicalizing idiomatic expressions, colloquialisms, proverbs, clichs, "wise sayings," "literary" quotations, and so on, the poet demonstrated that meaning is never univalent, that the referential scope of each word, syllable, letter or sound is practically unlimited. Also, by assuming the posture of a childish, home-bred investigator of language who in good faith follows closely prescribed rules, he exposed the groundlessness of the presumptuous faith in the rationality of both our world and our language, and in this way criticized all models of thought which rely on reductionist analysis and deductive logic. Showing that a word is an arbitrary sign which can be

manipulated, Bialoszewski warned that such manipulation does not always render the effect one seeks. At the same time, demonstrating that decontextualized codification of the rules of language apart from its usage impoverishes both language and experience, he underscored the value of literary experimentation and innovation.

Encouraging reflection on the uses and abuses of language, on the authority of reason, literary tradition and language itself, the "linguistic" poetry that flourished in the wake of de-Stalinization offered to the young writers of the New Wave of the late 1960s a model that was not merely artistically more advanced, progressive, "more modern," but which could also be used to teach resistance to the invisible persuasion of the media and official history. Opening poetry up to the living, "unliterary" language of the street and the workplace, New Wave poetry also investigated other semiotic systems, such as those functioning in photographs, popular songs, posters, newspapers, advertisements, and so on; systems which, as Roland Barthes observed, are easily "mythologized." Demystifying their languages as tools of manipulation and mind control, this poetry became a powerful tool in the social struggle.

The political relevance, or subversiveness, of New Wave writers was readily recognized by both readers and the communist authorities, and throughout the 1970s many of these young "linguists" found getting their work published increasingly difficult. It is hard to estimate exactly how instrumental the New Wave was in stimulating dissent, but the popularity in the 1970s among students and young intellectuals of such writers as Stanislaw Baranczak, Adam Zagajewski, or Julian Kornhauser certainly was indicative of New Wave poetry's relevance. For it was mostly students and young intellectuals, including many of the poets themselves, who through their activities in various dissident movements played such an important role in the emergence in 1980 of the Solidarity trade union.

As a literary movement, the Polish New Wave was clearly a product of concrete, historical circumstances, emerging in reaction to the regime's socially, economically, and culturally repressive policies in the late 1960s and 1970s. Incorporating the epistemological skepticism of the previous generation of "linguistic" poets into an activist poetic which placed ethics before aesthetics, New Wave writers openly defied authority by exposing the impact of totalitarian ideologies on language and literature. Their poems and novels were sometimes described by hostile critics as avant-garde or experimental, but--and this will certainly surprise many "postmodern-minded" American writers and readers--New Wave authors presented themselves as traditionalists calling for a return in Polish literature to realistic writing, writing whose experiential veracity would be grounded in its linguistic empiricism.

Upon closer examination, however, this identification of experience with language is indeed what many of the Polish New Wave poets share with the American

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and "surfiction" writers. Still, calling New Wave poetry "postmodern" might be seen as stretching the similarity between two rather distant literatures a little too far, especially since the meaning of this term is, as used in the American context, limited by specific historical and cultural factors. It should be noted, however, that some phenomena which "postmodernism" encompasses, or at least alludes to, seem to be more universal than the name itself. Different nations and societies speak different languages and have different experiences, but they all experience reality through and as language. If nothing else, the growing awareness of this fact in both the West and in European post-communist countries may suggest that--postmodern or not--our world is still, or perhaps again, one.

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