

**Lyric Poetry in the Age of Teleculture:
Issues in Contemporary American Poetics**

Peter Grieco

"The predicament of [20th century] culture," in the words of ethnologist James Clifford, is a predicament in which "reality is no longer a given, a natural, familiar environment." It is one in which "the self, cut loose from its attachments, must discover meaning where it may" (119). Throughout much of this century, American poets have sought to "answer" this predicament, this dislocation of cultural meaning, by attempting to hear and see, and make us, readers, hear and see, our world acutely, believing that through what may be called creative acts of perception we might indeed "discover meaning" where we may. As we now approach the end of the 20th century, it is time to ask if this project has changed for poets and readers, and if so, how? Surely, the modern predicament--of rootlessness, isolation and uncertainty--has remained enmeshed in the fabric of our "post-modern" lives. Yet, American culture in the last quarter of the century has also responded in new ways; ways whose medium is the omnipresent electronic media. It is the reaction of American poets to what they generally view as the inadequacy of this telecultural response that has come to drive many of the issues in contemporary American poetics.

In recent years American culture has in fact increasingly been dominated by the images, sound bytes, and communication behaviors that have become normative in the post-industrial world of TV talk shows, VCRs, FAX machines, Walkmans, laser printers, cellular phones, computer games, electronic mail, video terminals, and market-research advertising. What difference can the words and images of the poet make when we are thus bombarded by sights and sounds as never before? How can the earlier project of creative perception compete with a situation in which our days and nights are saturated with ready-made, pre-programmed perceptions--that shape our lives and make them resemble the very paid programming? What poetic exploration of personal emotion will make sense when market research appears to know more about us than we know about ourselves? "Is it possible for literature," asks Raymond Federman, "to survive the banalization

that mass media imposes on contemporary culture? . . . the way publicity and advertising ingests and digests culture? . . . the hypnosis of marketing, the sweet boredom of consensus, the cellophane wrapping of thinking, the commercialization of desire? (25). Were we to "discover meaning" where we may? All too often we settle for what we discover *en masse* as couch potatoes, video addicts, cyber-junkies, and compulsive consumers. Has poetry lost thus all power to wake us from our "sweet boredom of consensus," and remind us of the urgency of the predicament we inherit from our century? And if so, how may poetry regain its power to provoke our consciousness and awareness?

American poetry has rightly been concerned lately with addressing these issues, although this concern has taken a variety of different forms. The so-called "New Formalists," for example, arguing that poetry should return to its "roots" in rhyme and meter, have confronted the whole technocultural challenge by seeking to revive poetry as good old-fashioned "craft" (Holden 37). Others, such as Ross Talaricco, warning that media culture has forced "intellectual activity [to] the periphery of our cultural experience," insist that "artists must . . . work to make themselves available" (33)--not only their work but themselves. For Talaricco, contemporary poets should become nothing short of literary evangelists, "spreading the word," by creating and participating in writing programs for inner-city youth, unwed mothers, and housing project elderly, etc., in other words, for "common people looking for access to self-expression and self-revelation" (xi). But amid the general concern, it has been the avant-garde who have seized upon the telecultural as an opportunity both for the mobilization of energies released by the information, digital, and video revolutions and for the deployment of new critiques of emerging telecultural values. It will be the task of this essay to describe the terms and implications of this "mobilization" and "deployment." But since the value of what I am calling the avant-garde approach to poetry lies in its provocation of critical response, I will also be offering counter-critiques to the avant-garde positions I describe, positions concerning the value of the poetic subject, the nature of poetic language, and the status of the poetic image. For it is to these issues, and the role they have or don't have in contemporary media-ized culture, that the attentions of contemporary American poetic thinkers return again and again.

The Media-ization of Poetry

For the contemporary avant-garde, the personal computer screen, whose medium is a textual surface permanently transformable in terms of font size and design, layout, sequence, and lineation, has energized many poets' efforts to radically alter their styles of textual performance in print. Poetry can now, with unprecedented ease, make use of a huge variety of letter sizes, type faces, and word configurations. Likewise, the interactive nature of computer texts and operations have helped to emphasize the idea of poetry as reader-activated work. Computer programs have helped some poets determine the compositional procedures of their work; while

desk-top and internet publishing have made tremendous impacts on both the textual nature and distribution of works.

In short, avant-garde poets have sought to incorporate the new technologies in their work, in both form and theme. Take, for example, the untitled section of Steve McCaffery's *Panopticon* that begins:

Again and again. And so on. And so forth. And back again. And once more. And one more time. Again and again and through and through. Over and over again and again. Moments anticipatory of. Then canceled. . . .
(qtd. in Messerli 1021)

These hypnotic repetitions, which continue in this vein for several pages, make an implicit connection between the act of reading--of following words repeatedly back-and-forth across a block of print--and the act of television viewing. In these lines, the paratactic joining of fragments successfully calls to mind the flickering of ever similar video images, twenty-four hours a day, without connection or development, whose sole commercial aim is to hold the viewer's attention ("Moments anticipatory of"), with images presented and abruptly "canceled," whether by commercial interruption, by the rigidly time-formatted programming itself, or by the familiar clicking "through and through" of the channel spectrum by a viewer with a remote controller ("Again and again. . . . and back again"). To reinforce the video connection, McCaffery has composed his text as a virtual visual field. The thirty-seven lines which end this section consist of the sequential repetition of the words "and" and "on" resulting in a surprisingly captivating visual motif. This layout not only suggests the pixel composition of all video images, but confirms the intuition that one major effect of the use of word-processing computers by poets has been to promote a visual emphasis in their work at the expense of "voice": this poem has no "speaker" in the traditional sense, but is a visually organized arrangement of words and phrases, the kind of composition made seductively easy at the computer screen.

Yet as McCaffery's poem shows in its implicit critique of the contentless procedures of video media, the avant-garde has not turned its attention to technology simply for its own sake. For the avant-garde, the idea of computer operations has generally come to serve as a metaphor for the seductive dangers, false choices, and illusory sense of control that characterize our participation in the media-generated world. "The on-ness of the computer," warns poet Charles Bernstein, "is alien to any sort of relation we have with people or things or nature, which . . . can't be toggled on and off." If the computer world is an inhumanly alien one, it is also a world that operates as sinisterly as our all too human political one: "the real controller of the [computer] game is hidden . . . [in] the inaccessible system core that goes by the name of Read Only Memory." Bernstein concludes the analogy by commenting that "we live in a computer age in which the systems that control the formats that determine the genes of our everyday life are inaccessible to us" (qtd. in Perloff 188).

Self as Consumer Commodity

Paradoxically, one of the most important consequences of the avant-garde's apocalyptic thinking about the telecultural revolution has been to call into question the relevance of many modernist-descended "mainstream" practices in contemporary poetry. Specifically, the avant-garde questions the efficacy of the "image" and of "common language," which remain major preoccupations of mainstream poetry. Moreover, the poetic avant-garde has tended to align itself with recent literary theory to "decenter the subject," and critique the assumption that individual poetic utterances may issue from "authentic individual selves" somehow removed from the impersonal, exploitative, and commodified relations of the contemporary world and the teleculture that poets often seek to oppose (Perloff 19).

In line with this, Marjorie Perloff, the influential academic explicator of the avant-garde, has urged: "We must avoid the impasse of the Englit of Creative Writing classroom, where the literary text too often continues to be treated as an object detachable from its context, as if a 'poem' could exist in the United States today that has not been shaped by the electronic culture that produced it" (xiii). Both poets and readers, warns Perloff, must accept the fact that "the poet's arena is the electronic world," with no "landscape, mountain peak or lonely valley," and no "uncontaminated" poetic vantage or platform form which to wage opposition (xiii).

Far from making capable an effective opposition, the avant-garde tends to view the valorization of the poetic subject as hopelessly implicated in an "ideology of privacy" which offers the self as just one more commodity up for sale to consumers. This commodification of the subject dovetails dangerously with the long standing conformist ideology of American Individualism. As John Meyers notes, individualism "is a social doctrine. It is a public, not a private, view of the person, which others are bound to respect and to which a person is obliged to conform." Under the American system, the individual "achieves freedom and power only under the condition that he become isomorphic, or similar in form to all other individuals in the society" (209). Thus, even the common notion that the true self is a private self, capable of private withdrawal from the worlds of work and social relations--the belief that ones real life is "elsewhere"--can be seen as a standardized component of individuality. The widespread notion, for example, that my "true self" is my leisure self--"living for the good times"--my partying self, recreational self, etc., all depend on activities, costumes, and products which can be purchased ready-made. When AT&T recently set about to market a new telecommunications service, they pitched it as an enhancement to personal flexibility and effectiveness, and called it the "I Plan." All Americans, it seems, are individuals, but some can become more individual than others--if only they buy a product that thousands, often millions, of others will also buy.

The avant-garde has extended this critique of the consumer-individual to the practices of mainstream contemporary poetry, to the "productions" of what Bernstein calls "official verse culture." Bernstein satirizes this poetry as a "form of instant uplift" (qtd. in Perloff 19). Perloff remarks: "Read one now and again and you'll participate in a ritual of 'sensitivity' and 'self-awareness'" (19-20). For her, as well as Bernstein and others, all this poetic uplift is just a lot of hot air--"so much/helium in the prevailing ether," as Bernstein's "Ms Otis Regrets" has it, so many "Cyrillic blouses bouncing in the wind" (Bernstein, *New American Writing* 11).

What does Bernstein have in mind? Something like these lines from Paul Harper's "Eddie's Tea," should give an idea:

Friday morning
we do poetry.
Mellow friends,
ripening in meekness.
...
Walking a tightrope
across Niagara Falls
without worry,
without fear. . . . (qtd. in Talaricco 58)

Touché. Poetry as the "sensitive" floating of ego balloons in "the prevailing ether" (over the mists of Niagara, no less). Yet to urge the deflation of "self-awareness"--as opposed to self-deception--seems misguided. "Eddie's Tea" serves an honorable purpose. Written by a senior citizen from one of Talaricco's poetry workshops, it is about the attempt to learn the "ropes" of poetry on the way to approaching one's own mortality. Is this "instant-uplift," or is it closer to the "self-knowledge, insight, confidence, and self respect" that Talaricco claims it struggles for (53)?

Talaricco argues that "At the heart of an artistic expression is the need for an individual to seek harmony with his or her environment" (7), implying that the relative success of that harmony is a measure of what is commonly called beauty. Yet, as Anne Janowitz points out:

One of the effects of the study of pathologies of capitalism, on the one hand, and [of] the social construction of subjectivity, on the other . . . has been to conflate the beautiful with the ideological, thereby handing over the aesthetic to the right wing. (242)

Further suggesting that ideas of beauty and agency tend to depend on one another (just as avant-garde critique tends to dismiss both), Janowitz recommends that "in order to recover the possibility of a progressive aesthetic beauty, we need an informed return to a model that analyzes literary language within a contentious dynamic of agents" (242).

Emptying of Speech

To go along with its critique of the poetic subject as a guarantor of the authenticity of poetic value, the avant-garde levels an attack on the speech-based poetics that have had such a strong influence on poetic practice since Wordsworth. The belief that poetry should direct itself to the "simulation of natural speech" (35) impresses the avant-garde as mistakenly outdated in a world saturated by "mediaspeak." Perloff summarizes this position in the following manner:

'[Let us] think like a wise man,' said Yeats, 'but express ourselves like the common people.' But how DO the common people, as distinct from others, express themselves in our late twentieth-century mass culture? As far as the media are concerned--and this is where most of us come into contact with representations of the people--class difference as determinant of language use has become insignificant. . . . [having been replaced by] an up-to-date Standard American English, whose vocabulary, syntax, idiom, and even inflection are reassuringly uniform. (35-6)

She adds that on TV, reality and real talk must submit to the stagings and filterings of media mechanisms, becoming a "hyperreality" of lies without basis in social fact (39). Such TV-talk has become our common language, argues Perloff, a language "emptied of all particularity of reference" (40). And Bernstein notes that

the dominant public language of our society has been so emptied of specific, socially refractory content that it can be easily and widely disseminated; but this is a dissemination without seed. It is not communicative action but [acceptable] communication behavior: one speaks less to particular individuals than to those aspects of their consciousness that have been programmed to receive the already digested scenes or commentaries provided. (*A Poetics*224)

But then, how does anything truly meaningful ever get said? "We find the word already occupied," observes V. N. Volosinov (62), yet often manage to "re-accent" it as we attempt to put it to use in the spoken contexts of our lives. By contrast, the avant-garde likes to fantasize about a language "uncontaminated" by speech, that never needs to communicate, and that aims not at "aspects of consciousness," but somewhere beyond consciousness. Or, at least these seem to be the fantasies of Michael Palmers aptly titled "Eighth Sky":

It is scribbled along the body
Impossible even to say a word

An alphabet has been stored beneath the ground
It is a practice alphabet, work of the hand (. . .) (qtd. in Messerli 673)

The language the poet desires is "work of the hand" not of the mouth. Its "alphabet has been stored beneath the ground," beyond the claims of social property, discovered, as the words go on, not to say, "on a day free of sounds" (qtd. in Messerli 673). The avant-garde dictum, "I HATE SPEECH" (Silliman, qtd. in Reinfeld 1), seems over-blown, and even contradictory in its tacit acknowledgement of speech as a "provoking condition of lyric utterance" (Bialostosky 75).

Deleting the Image Field

If, for the avant-garde, the search for common language and authentic voice in poetry has become discredited by mediaspeak, there is also reason to suspect the modernist legacy of concern for presentation of "clear visual image" (Perloff 77). Here again, the argument is that the "image field" of contemporary culture has become so saturated that poets must now turn elsewhere to produce their poetic effects. The eyes of both poet and reader have become dulled. When, as Perloff asserts, "radiance" has become a product sold by cosmetic firms and soap manufacturers, "the image becomes a problematic poetic property" (77). It is not just the intensity of the media image that undermines the value of the "luminous detail" in poetry, but the "deceptive quality" (78) of what we see that alarms the avant-garde. We literally buy what we see, deceiving ourselves that what we see, like a perfectly manicured ten-foot billboard hamburger, is what we get. Advertisements for new cars, notes Perloff, never show drivers stuck in traffic. Rather, they typically show motorists escaping across a boundless natural landscape, as if cars had wings and drivers never needed to get to work. "Such powerful images," she concludes, "challenge poetic discourse to deconstruct them rather than to duplicate them" (92). The aim of the poet, argues in turn Bernstein, is "to expose the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought" (qtd. in Holden 47).

Yet I find Perloff's conflation of the poetic "image" and the advertising image unconvincing. The two are not the same. The discerning language of poetry can have the virtue of helping readers make discriminations in how they view the world. Fra Lippo Lippi's argument--that "we're made so that we love/ First when we see them painted, things we have passed/ Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see" (Browning 43)--can be well applied to poetry, too, as Browning intended. The better the readers are able to discern poetry's verbal images, the more they are compelled to see more of the detail and complexity of their non-literary worlds, and the less susceptible they become to the pictorial images of media and advertising whose gloss and lightning quickness are anti-discriminatory. Beyond this, as long as poetry concerns itself with evoking pleasure--which Browning calls "wonder" (43)--the image will be important. Such "wonder" is one of the aims of Brenda Galvin's "Seals in the Inner Harbor":

Ducks, at first, except they didnt
fly when we rounded the jetty . . .
didnt spread panic among themselves
peeling the whole flock off the water,
but followed, popping under
and poking up as if to study our faces . . . (qtd. in Holden 3-4)

Jonathan Holden finds that "passages like 'spread panic among themselves,/ peeling the whole flock off the water', are . . . 'scientifically' exact, yet superior to scientific

observation alone: they are alive with the rhythm and shape of what they describe" (4). Nevertheless, the possibility of such luminous moments remains dubious for many avant-garde poets, to whom they seem rather more like dead moments already lived and spent. In Nathaniel MacKey's "Slipped Quadrant," for example, instead of curious seals, it is the image of a corpse that is "borne up":

Wrought surfaces, putative
soul, cheated heart. Shot
 body borne up to be looked
at, learned from, one
 heretical
moments reprimand . . . (qtd. in Messerli, 1041)

MacKey's anti-luminous "moment," occurring as a "slip" in avant-garde poetic decorum, is "heretical." The image makes its appearance only to "reprimand" MacKey, reminding him and other poets that it is dead and can only "cheat" the "heart."

Radical Artifice

If the computer and media revolutions have come to "create a semantic world" in which speech has been emptied and the poetic image pre-empted, the response of the avant-garde has been to call for a "poetic discourse [which] defines itself as that which can violate the system" (Perloff 189). If postmodern consciousness is "always already saturated with what we might call 'culture bytes'" (193)--those pre-programmed responses keyed to our positions as consumers and our participation in "business as usual"--the counter-aim of avant-garde poetry has been to disrupt the "info-flow." Poetry should be that discourse "that defers reading" (105), that forces a "delay that makes us see what is really happening" (111).

The more radical poetries have come to devalue poetic "authenticity" as more "business as usual," and to turn instead, as Perloff explains, "toward ARTIFICE, toward poetry as making or praxis rather than poetry as impassioned speech, [or] self-expression" (45). She considers that "the image as referring to something in the external world is [to be] replaced by the word as image," by "visualization of the words constituent parts" (78). The "transparency" of language is to be resisted. "To see the letter not as phoneme but as ink, and to further insist on that materiality," maintains Steve McCaffery, "inevitably contests the status of language as bearer of uncontaminated meaning" (qtd. in Perloff 129). For Bernstein, cultural "bytes" of all descriptions are to be parodied by revealing juxtapositions and mis-hearings--the conversion of "the pump into coaxial fable" (*New American Writing* 10). The "straight-forward" statement is to be replaced by fractured syntax, or by a straight-forwardness whose intention is to demonstrate the futility of arriving at any place that is meaningful by way of that all too easy direction: ". . . How come/ you keep

beating the languishing/ azaleas or don't they have/ interactive hypermedia under/ the rock you crept out from?" (*New American Writing* 11).

Perloff affirms that the avant-garde poets emphasis on "artifice" takes many forms, "from . . . the gestural and playfully parodic lyric of John Ashbery, to the concrete or sound-text poem, to rule-generated work, to collage text . . . to the antisyntactical and anti-referential lyric that goes by the name of Language poetry." And she admits that "all these are difficult poetries," that are difficult at least if ones norm is the 'direct speech, direct feeling' model dominant in the sixties and early seventies" (45). Yet these poetries' difficulty is exactly the point. They aim to be difficult.

Poetry as Democratic Practice

Many commentators have found fault with avant-garde practices as ones which work perniciously "against the conventionally referential and representational capacities of language," and "rob [it] of its emotive power." The contemporary avant-garde has been accused "of preaching only to the already converted," while "discouraging differences of opinion," and producing little more than "solipsistic muzak" (Reinfeld 55).

That avant-garde poetry is difficult and not to everyones taste does not trouble me; what does, however, is the arrogant, elitist, beneath-contempt manner the avant-garde has of reducing and dismissing most contemporary poetry. The avant-garde often seems to practice poetry as a form of up-to-date technology, thereby mirroring what it professes most to despise. As purveyors of the New and Improved!, avant-garde writers produce what is "superior" to "less advanced" writing--and as such, perpetuate an elitism of conspicuous consumption and of access that shades into the elitism of teleculture itself.

Access to cyberspace, and to all forms of "the latest"--from superscreen television to the membership in the "I-Plan"--"further marks and divides an already divided world [of] haves versus have-nots" (alt.yours 29). And just as being computer-literate or not is "evidence of access"--of the socio-economic limits on access--so, too, is admission into the world of avant-garde poetry an issue of limited access: to universities, graduate programs, and other refined circles of knowledge; to the leisure time it takes to become indoctrinated into its methods, aims, and languages.

I agree that there is a need for poetry that can expose the vacuous effects of teleculture--the passive acceptance that comes in the guise if illusory freedom. There is much to learn from the avant-garde about creating that exposure, and about creating a lively discourse on poetics. But it is the very "otherness" of poetry--its difference from teleculture--that helps position it already in line with avant-garde concerns, providing a genuine alternative field for expanding our abilities to "discover meaning where [we] may." And because writing is relatively "low-tech,"

requiring none of the prohibitive capital investment that characterizes many forms of cultural production, it is, by that much, available as the medium of the people. The argument that much of contemporary poetry has become obsolete is, among other things, an argument against the democratic trends that have radically expanded poetic authorship over the past twenty-five years. As Holden points out, this democratization of poetry began gaining force with the expansion of higher education in the 1960s, and was bolstered through the 1970s by such programs as "Poets-in-the-Schools" sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, and by the phenomenal success of Creative Writing Programs (20-1). Holden sees the avant-garde's "self-consciousness about poetic artifice and poetic epistemology" as part of a general "backlash" against this "liberal democratization of poetry" (22). Nevertheless, "By the mid-1980s, probably more good poetry was being written and published in America than in any country at any time in history. . . . [N]ot only was the quality of much of this poetry very high, but . . . the kinds of poems were various, constituting an aesthetic pluralism" (29-30).

Democratization has meant that, for many writers, poetry has become one way to claim a place in a culture they themselves can have a hand in shaping. It has enabled them to raise a poetic voice, in an attempt to assert some self-determination over experience, in a culture that remains indifferent and even hostile to that self-determination.

A few examples may serve to illustrate this point. June Jordan's well-known "Poem About My Rights" is the poet's attempt to refute the denial of her self-determined existence in a culture that views her as being "wrong the wrong sex the wrong age/ the wrong skin/ the wrong hair the/ wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic/ the wrong sartorial I.":

but let this be unmistakable this poem
is not my consent I do not consent

. . .

I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name

My name is my own my own my own my own. . . . (qtd. in Ellmann 1470)

Similarly, in Lawrence Kearny's "There Are 23 Steel Mills in Buffalo, N.Y.," the raising of a poetic voice is meant to break the silence of habitual submission:

By 6 were up
& at breakfast, reading the paper
whispering as we read,
in wry, submissive voices:
the voice to be used at work
to apologize, to confess,
to exact penance
from every word we know . . . (Oresick and Coles 129-130)

And in David Brownstead's "Speak to It," the effort is to "spit/ it/ out" as an alternative to the values of a community saturated by violence and self-violence (unpaginated).

Many, like Holden and Talaricco, see the "fate of American poetry" dependent on securing and expanding its democratic victories, something not necessary for itself but for the difference such expansion can make to society. For Talaricco, the damage done by teleculture--in the way it encourages expectations for "immediate gratification," promotes the "general shortening of the attention spans," and creates insatiable appetites for "sensationalism" and "one-liners"--has left us a society that "no longer provide[s] the prerequisites for language development," let alone for "self-expression through language." American culture, he warns, has become a culture that "rewards those who use language to deceive others, and abandons those who use it in attempts to enlighten" (49-50).

Whether or not American poets will *en masse* answer Talaricco's call for poetic evangelism, the avant-garde poets seem right when they argue that it is the state of contemporary culture, particularly the strength of its technocultural voltage, that has been driving many of the issues in contemporary poetry including questions of how and for whom poets should write. Poets' responses, to the Age of Global Teleculture in which they find themselves living, are closely related to what they articulate about the aims of their writing. The job of the American poet in the age of global teleculture seems to have become that of exploring the domains of more or less free expression that remain for all of us; and to both liberate and put to use as much of the common cultural material as he or she finds available.

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