

Language Poetry and the Problem of the Subject

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Abstract

Under the light of poststructuralist theories the movement known as the Language-oriented, "Language-centered" poetry, "radical poetry," or "Language poetry" foregrounds writing, and therefore language as a system. Language poets propose that subject is a construction of language, and that this construction has to do with ideology and power relations operating in language. The aim here is to make the reader aware of the functioning of the capitalist ideology in his/her language habits. But such a stance indicates the presence of a conscious author behind the text. Therefore, Language poets' approach to the problem of the subject seems to be closer to the impersonal author of T. S. Eliot and the New Criticism rather than confirming the death of the author. To remove the author-God behind the text is possible not by murdering the author but by reinstating his/her presence in and through language, by establishing a communicative relation between the writing and the written subject.

Key Words: American Poetry, language, language poetry

Özet

"Dil-merkezli," "Dil-yönelimli" şiir, "radikal şiir," ya da "Dil şiiri" olarak adlandırılan oluşum post yapısalcı kuramların ışığı altında, yazıyı, dolayısıyla bir sistem olarak dili ön plana çıkarır; Dil şiiri, öznenin dilin içinde, dil tarafından yapılandırıldığına, bu yapılandırmanın dile içkin ideoloji ve güç ilişkileri ile bağlantılı olduğuna dikkat çeker. Burada amaç, dilin dinamikleri içinde, okuru dil alışkanlıklarına sinen ideolojik yönlendirmeler konusunda bilinçlendirmek ve davranış değişikliği yaratmaktır. Ancak, böyle bir amaç, metnin gerisinde duran bilinçli bir şairi gerektirmektedir. Dolayısıyla, Dil şiirinin özne sorununa yaklaşımı yazarın ölümünü teyit etmekten çok T. S. Eliot ve Yeni Eleştirinin birey olarak yazarı metnin dışına iten tavrına yakın görünmektedir. Tanrı-Yazar'dan kurtulmanın yolu ise yazarı öldürmek değil yazarın bizzat dil içinde, dil yolu ile bulunuşunu sağlamak, yazan ile yazılan özne arasında etkileşim kurmaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Amerikan Şiiri, dil, dil şiiri

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I

Robert Grenier's famous statement "I HATE SPEECH," which appeared in the inaugural issue of *This* in 1971, marked a break with the long-standing tradition of voice-based poetry, and pronounced the inching of a new "movement" which would later be termed as "language-oriented," "language-centered," or "language" poetry/writing. This new movement "would require the poets to look (in some ways for the first time) at what a poem is actually made of – not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or in one's mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself" (Silliman, 1986, p. xvi). The term Language poetry covers many different practices rather than a single style, and common to all these practices is the deliberate rejection of the expressive theories of language as well as the traditional approaches to the subject. Backed by poststructuralist propositions, Language poetry calls attention to reality as constructed by language, and to the political nature of such construction. Those who argue for this mode of practice regard it as a radical alternative to the mainstream poetry and poetics, and a meeting point between poetry and theory, demanding its readers to be well-versed in the ongoing theoretical and philosophical debates. Those who argue against it criticize its overemphasis on formal dynamics, its antihumanist stance, its overintellectualism, and therefore its appeal only to a limited number of readers.

Language poets position themselves against the establishment poetry, or to borrow the phrase from Charles Bernstein, the "official verse culture," and its poetics. Unlike the highly intellectual, formalist, impersonal poetry of Eliot and the New Criticism to which "New American Poets" objected in the previous decades however, mainstream poetry since the early seventies has been characterized by the highly conventional "neo-confessional, neo-realist"¹ style that has been taught and practiced in workshops and Creative Writing departments in universities, and that has increasingly dominated the taste of the academy, the publishing media, and the poetry reading public.² In *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* Bob Perelman, a poet whose name is associated with the language movement, lists what he takes to be the major characteristics of the mainstream poet and poetry as follows:

¹ Marjorie Perloff, "After Language Poetry," p. 5.

² Language poets attack creative writing programs and the kind of poetry promoted in them because the establishment of these programs in the academy as a separate field of study helped legitimize the mainstream poetics whose basic assumptions were seriously challenged by the poststructuralist theory. Besides, those who attend these programs become "certified" poets, pursue career opportunities in these programs, and continue publishing books of poems that endorse the prevailing aesthetics. These programs play a normative function in the creation and reception of poetry as they lay down the criteria for poetic practice and aesthetic judgment. Thus, they exert a decisive influence over the publication, circulation and criticism of poetry and fulfill the expectations of the average poetry reading public. For more information on this topic see Christopher Beach's *Poetic Culture*.

The mainstream poet guarded a highly distinct individuality; while craft and literary knowledge contributed to poetry, sensibility and intuition reigned supreme. The mainstream poet was not an intellectual and especially not a theoretician. Hostility to analysis and, later, to theory were constitutive of such a poetic stance . . . The poet as engaged, oppositional intellectual, and poetic form and syntax as sites of experiment for political and social purposes—these would not be found. The confessional poets were the modal: Lowell, Plath, Sexton, Berryman. Poems were short, narrative, focused on small or large moments of crisis or optimism. Whether the form was free verse or rhymed iambic stanzas the tone was conversational. (Perelman, 1996, p. 12)

Perelman’s account reveals that mainstream poetry defines poetry exclusively in terms of traditional romantic lyric, relying on the individual author who narrates his/her authentic, immediate experiences, using language as an instrument³. The main criticism directed against the mainstream academic poetry by Perelman, in fact by all Language poets is that such practice pays no attention to such crucial issues as the nature and function of language, problem of authorship, and readership, with which contemporary theory preoccupies itself. Behind this indifference, argues Barrett Watten, lies the wish to separate “contemporary literary practice” from “intellectual life.”⁴ The anti-intellectualism of academic mainstream poetry may sound like an oxymoron, still, an indifference to theory and criticism characterizes this kind of poetry. Bernstein also criticizes those critics whose assessment of contemporary poetry is based wholly on the aesthetics prescribed and promoted by Creative Writing programs and workshops:

It is particularly amusing that those who protest the loudest about the fraudulence or aridness or sameness of contemporary poetry that insists on being contemporary, dissident, different, and who profess, in contrast, the primacy of the individual voice, fanned by a gentile inspiration, produce work largely indistinguishable from dozens of their peers and, moreover, tend to recognize the value only of poetry that fits into the narrow horizon of their particular style and subject matter. As if poetry were a craft that there is a right way or wrong way to do: in which case, I prefer the wrong way—anything better than the well-wrought epiphany of predictable measure—for at least the cracks and flaws and awkwardness show signs of life. (Bernstein, 1992, p. 2)

What the above passage makes clear is, and here lies the paradox, that those who complain about the near death or, at best the “increasingly marginal position” of poetry in the contemporary literary and cultural scene, contribute to its marginalization by

³ Perloff “Lyric Impasse,” p.174

⁴ qtd. in Beach, 32. Similarly, Perloff argues that the workshop practice appealed especially to those “whose intellect was not up to reading Barthes or Foucault or Kristeva” “After Language Poetry,” p. 4.

downgrading it to the “well-wrought epiphany of predictable measure.” In other words, they limit contemporary poetry to the personal expression of the authorial subject on the one hand, and complain about its lack of interest in, or inadequacy to respond to the current social, political and philosophical issues on the other. While this criticism may apply to the mainstream poetry, it definitely leaves out a great deal of poetic practice that does not conform into that pattern.⁵

Language poets’ attempt to realign poetry to the intellectual developments is directed to reclaiming the power of poetry to produce change for the better, against the charges that poetry does not adequately respond to the circumstances of the era and therefore deserves to be marginalized in the literary and cultural scene. Language poets’ attitude against mainstream poetry and poetics reveals itself especially in their reaction against the latter’s centralization of the author as a conscious, unified self who precedes the text and intends its meaning. In line with the anti-authorial discourse of poststructuralist theory, Language Poets wish to do away with the author as the source of the meaning and value of the text, placing the emphasis on the social and linguistic construction of the subject instead. The author of language poetry is to function like an engineer whose job is not to create but to construct units so as to disclose the constructed character of the unit, the materiality of the material with(in) which the unit is constructed, and the political nature of both the material and the construct. This mode of construction does not necessitate the engineer as a human being to be involved in the act of construction; in fact, the “human” engineer has been driven wholly away from the construction site. This study inquires whether this picture really characterizes Language poets’ practice; in other words, whether Language poets live up to their own prescriptions concerning the author. For, though the “human” author seems to be abandoned in their texts, especially in the case of such politically-oriented poets as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, and Bruce Andrews, who are convinced that language is infused with ideology and power relations, the author seems to operate on the text if only to uncover the ideological functioning of language. The position Language poets confer to the author reminds the reader of the detached, impersonal author-God of T.S. Eliot and the New Criticism with this important difference, Language poets insist on using language as the material within which the ideological nature of language is displayed. But before going further and concentrating on the issue of the author as perceived by Language poets, it will be useful, I think, to turn to the approaches toward the problem of the author taken by some modernist and early

⁵ Perloff, “Lyric Impasse,” pp. 172-3.

postmodernist poets whose practice already provided alternatives to the modes of writing that place the human subject at the center of poetry.

II

In “The Genealogy of Postmodern Poetry” Albert Gelpi formulates the complicated relation of the postmodernist poetry to modernist practice as “Modernism – Romanticism = Postmodernism” (1990, p. 14). Reductivist as it may seem, this formulation nevertheless usefully suggests that postmodernist poetry makes use of many modernist techniques and forms, but rejects the romantic principles inherent in modernist poetry such as the organic unity, the supremacy of the imagination, and the privileged position assigned to the human agency. The modernist poet, Gelpi goes on to argue, “merely put the mask of impersonality on the romantic ego-genius” (1990, p. 5). One conclusion that can be derived from this statement is that the modernist poetics foregrounds the human imagination, in Charles Altieri’s word, as the “primary form-giver and as creator of ethical principles.”⁶ In other words, the human subject functions as the value generating agency through his/her masked presence, and the poem, as a medium or a “key to enter the order of relationships to be found behind and beyond the particulars” (Altieri, 1995, p. 105). Pound’s poetry already signals a change from this direction by limiting the poet’s role, often against his will,⁷ in organizing the disparate pieces in the poem to produce a coherent whole. Pound further limits the poet’s position as a “form-giver” by insisting on his/her anti-symbolist treatment of the object. For, much as Pound is convinced that a natural order exists and can be manifested in language, he sees it possible only through the treatment of the particular objects of the poet’s attention directly, almost in a “scientific” manner, that is, without acting upon, or attempting to point “behind” or “beyond” them, as T. S. Eliot and the New Critics do despite their claims of impersonality and objectivity. More important in terms of its future consequences, however, would be his use of a “complexly polyphonic style” (Bernstein, 1992, p. 125) in constructing *The Cantos*. In this work, Pound does not rely on the single voice of the subject as the “ordering principle” but allows various voices

⁶ Charles Altieri explains the two different approaches to the subject in Romantic poetry in terms of the Coleridgean emphasis on the recreation of the object through the subject, and the early Wordsworthian emphasis on the subject created by means of its participation in the object. Altieri associates the first with symbolist modernism and the second with what he calls the poetics of “immanence” Altieri, 1995, p. 108.

⁷ Albert Gelpi argues that Pound and other modernist poets like Eliot, Joyce, Williams, Stevens, strove to achieve coherence, “all wanted the pieces in their collages to make a picture” (1990, p. 2). But the significance of *The Cantos* resides in the resistance of the particulars to cohere into a pattern. In “Pounding Fascism,” Charles Bernstein makes the same point: “[h]aving created a text so rich with tones that could not be controlled in terms of traditional criteria of coherence and unity, Pound redoubled his effort to master an authority his textual practice had made impossible,” 1992, p. 125

and modes of speech to exist simultaneously and in an equal manner (Perloff, 1990, p. 137).

The projectivist poets endorse much of Pound's poetics. Olson, Duncan, Creeley, and other poets who are associated with projectivist movement posit that "value" in a given poem does not depend on the human subject entirely but on the leveling of the object and subject in the field of the poem. In other words, the individual subject contributes to the emergence of value through "participating in the world beyond himself" (Altieri, 1995, p. 108). For these poets writing is not a way of "informing" others of value but "a way of being informed" of value through language (Altieri, 1995, p. 108). Carefully distinguishing his mode of writing from the confessional poetry or "do-it-yourself psychoanalysis" as he calls it (Creeley, 1989, p. 515), Creeley says, "much happens[,] one has no conscious information of it until it is there, in the words," and "a deeper fact of revelation I feel very actual in writing, a realization, reification, of *what is*" (1989, p. 515, emphasis in the original). Creeley's belief in the immanent nature of language can also be detected in Robert Duncan. "We do not make things meaningful," remarks Duncan, "but in our making we work toward an awareness of meaning; poetry reveals itself to us as we obey the orders that appear in our work. In writing I do not organize my words but follow my consciousness of . . . orders in the play of forms and meanings toward poetic form" (Duncan, 1985, p. 82). The subject, then, becomes "informed" by yielding to the order made manifest in language, and importantly not by manipulating language toward some willed or purposive creation of value.

If the poet does not occupy a "marginal presence" in these poets' work yet, s/he is not regarded as the primary agency either. In fact, from the perspective of the twenty first century one can see that what the projectivist poets argue against is *not* the presence of the individual subject in the poem but his/her presence as either "ego," or the organizer, "director" from behind the mask. Otherwise, the poet is still "in" the poem, though more as a bodily presence—as the organ of perception and articulation—than as a subjective self. Furthermore, the projectivist poets, even Creeley whose *Pieces* is regarded by some as the initial point of departure from this kind of practice toward language poetics, emphasize the poet's naturally acquired linguistic techniques as the source of utterance in the poem. "[T]he intimate knowing of a way of speaking – such as is gained as Olson says with mother's milk," according to Creeley, "offers the kind of intensity that poetry particularly admits" (Creeley, 1993, p. 28). Similarly, Robert Duncan is reported to have said in a discussion with Language poets over the dismissal of the speaking subject in the latter's work that "I in no way believe that there is such a thing as 'just language,' any more than there is 'just footprints.' I mean, it *is* human life that prints itself

everywhere in it and *that's* what we read when we're really reading"⁸ For these poets what the reader hears while reading a poem is not "just language" but a language peculiar to the individual poet. The basic difference between the projectivist poet and the language poet is, therefore, that the former, in Ron Silliman's phrasing, "attempts to rediscover a physical ordering of language, but posits that order not within the language but within the individuals" (Silliman, 1986, p. 15). Because of the centrality of the human subject in their work these poets are often called as the "late modern" poets (Blazing, 1995, p. 3), "postmodern Romantics" (Watten, 1986, p. 485), or "Neoromantics" (Gelpi, 1990, p. 5).

The shift of emphasis from the human subject to language operations in postmodern poetry represents, on a larger scale, a move away from post-Enlightenment humanism towards the antihumanism or the "post-humanism" of the postmodern era. The authority to be the "form-giver" and "creator of ethical principles" is now assigned to language with a very important shift in perspective, that value is arbitrarily formed and ideologically charged, and therefore it is to be "disrupted" and/or "restaged" within the system of language (Andrews, 1990, p. 31). The human subject is not just deprived of its privileged position as the agency that creates a discourse; it is totally cleared away from the scene for having been already a fiction authored by the language(s) of the capitalist ideology.

III

In "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes questions the three main assumptions that lie behind the literary production, that the work is an original, unique creation, that it is created by an author, and that the author is a "human person." He substitutes "the tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable sources of culture" for original creation, "language" for author, and the "instance writing" for human person. Barthes attacks the author-centered approach that perceives the author simultaneously as the writer and the written subject. The latter being a construction in and by language, the author removed, then, becomes the "Author-God," the transcendental subject, the "a priori subject situated outside the play of space and time, language, history, culture and *différance*" (Burke, 1998, p. 107). Furthermore, since the author as an individual human being is the "epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology" (Barthes, 1977, p. 143), the removal of the author will liberate the text at once from the "tyranny" of the human author, and of the capitalist ideology that sanctions this author. The absence of the author frees the reader-critic from investigating the author's underlying purpose or design, and from reiterating the meaning and value he/she has carved on the text.

⁸ qtd. in Eleana Kim's *The New Americans vs. the Treed Americans*, p. 2.

No longer a “representative,” a “genius” with a mask, or a “demiurge” over and behind the text, the author is now defined as a “scribbler,” “scriptor,” or at best, a “performer” with no capacity either to create or to mediate the creation of an authentic discourse. The author redefined as a scriptor becomes an agency whose “only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (Barthes, 1977, p. 146). In discrediting the author as a human being Barthes also counteracts the notion of literature as the expression of the authentic self: “Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words” (Barthes, 1977, p. 146). Barthes further tells that

The modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate. . . . the hand, cut off from any voice, born by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin, than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins. (1977, p. 145-6)

Like Barthes, Foucault sees the disappearance of the author as the liberation of the text from the burden of having to express the author’s “exalted emotions” (Foucault, 1986, p. 139). But the removal of the author does not signify his/her retreat into the transcendental signified either, for, in the presence of the author as the transcendental signified the text would still be a “kind of enigmatic supplement of the author beyond his death” (1986, p. 141). Neither should the term “écriture” denote a writing into which the author-God has inscribed some hidden meanings. Freed from the author, the écriture now “stands for a remarkably profound attempt to elaborate the conditions of any text, both the conditions of its spatial dispersal and its temporal deployment” (Foucault, 1986, pp.140-1).

Both Barthes and Foucault set aside the notion of the author as the “originator” or creator of a discourse. The absence of the authorial design and intention renders the writing a play of signification, and the “I” that appears in the work no longer refers to an “actual individual” but to a subject fabricated in and by language, to a subject that is “a complex and variable function of discourse” (Foucault, 1986, p. 148).

IV

Does the death of the man necessarily imply the death of the author? Is the author simply a specific and regional instantiation of the philosophical anthropos? Of the subject of knowledge? Of the cogito? Of the logos? What sense of author disappears in the death of man? Intratextual author? Extratextual author? Psychobiographical signified? (Burke, 1998, p. 104).

In his deconstructive analysis of the poststructuralist critique of authorship given above, Séan Burke calls attention to the fact that the term “author” has come to designate more than one position over the course of time (Burke, 1998, p. 107). The “anti-authorial” attitude, however, does not take into account the different forms of authorship, and in its eagerness to do away with the author, it tends to ignore that Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida target their attacks specifically to the author as the “knowing subject,” Cartesian *cogito*, Kantian “transcendental subject” (1998, p. 107), the author who

is to his text as God, the *auctor vitae*, is to his world: the unitary cause, source and master to whom the chain of textual effects must be traced, and in whom they find their genesis, meaning, goal and justification. The author becomes . . . ‘the transcendental signified’ and attains the supernatural privilege of being at once the beginning and end of his text.” (Burke, 1998, p. 23)

Language poets share the poststructuralist emphasis on language as a play of signification that robs the author of the prestige and power to create original discourse. Their attack at the mainstream author and at the perception of the text as a “confession of lived personal experience” (Silliman, 1998: 362) targets an author who seems to be at once outside and inside the text, at once the identity and the agency, the producer and the product of the text (Burke, 1998, p. 55). However, the author as the “transcendental subject,” must be viewed as “emptied out all psychological and biographical content,” for the simple reason that “a personalized, psychobiographically constituted transcendental subject is unthinkable” (Burke, 1998, p. 107). The “ontological gap” between the writer and the written renders the written subject always already a construction of language (Burke, 1998, p. 55). It follows from this, then, that subjectivity is not really a matter of whether or not the poem involves the author as person, given the distance between the author and the subject, identity and agency; rather, it is a matter of the poet’s assumed authority over language to create the illusion that he or she is providing the reader with a “true” account of an experience. In other words, what language poets argue against is the mainstream poet’s offering this representation as reality.⁹

Language poets attempt to “break the automatism of the ‘I’ and its naturalized voice” (Perelman, 1996, p. 13) so as to disclose the constructedness of the written

⁹ Burke points out that Barthes does not argue against Autobiography as a form of writing in which the writer becomes the written. What he argues against, however, is the author’s claim to represent reality as “legerdemain, by which the hand that writes seeks to efface itself in the interests of re-presenting the past as an immediate reality.” p. 57.

subject(s) within the network of signification. They view the text as the ground where different modes of writing and various subject positions are juxtaposed in the Poundian fashion, and are left to operate without being subjected to the unifying authoritative voice of the author. Personal experience is not left aside, but is not considered as the origin or content of the text either. Subjective experience prior to writing is not narrated in expressive language but is relived through subjection to the pressure of language. This mode of writing foregrounds the dynamics of language within which the subject is constructed rather than the realistic representations made available through instrumentalist language.

Bernstein, Andrews, Silliman, Perelman and other Language poets posit that the instrumentalist use of language would serve the interests of the consumer capitalism that would see to have *its* reality represented. Behind the reality we perceive as natural or self-evident, so these poets argue, lies the language of capitalist ideology infused in the structural and semiotic elements of language. Language poets regard language, and therefore the poem, as the ground for challenging the dominant discourse of this ideology, and their primary interest lies in so constructing the poem as to expose the reader to the “social & ideological nature & function of language habits in which we are ordinarily so absorbed as to ignore or repress” (Bernstein, 1992, p. 35). In other words, they attempt to “lay bare the devices of statement and signification” (Perelman, 1986, p. 489), to disclose the “[a]nti-obvious” behind the given (Andrews, 1990, p. 28) by exposing the reader to the disrupted elements of syntax and signification, thus disorienting and enabling him/her to discern the otherwise indiscernible “languages of power” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 17). “[T]he world,” remarks Bernstein, “whether we like it or not, is a post-industrial global economic system in which there are languages of power, and that it’s those languages that have to be confronted in their own terms” (1990, p. 17). This kind of commitment, however, necessitates an author already awakened to the functioning of this mechanism, an author who intends to make the reader aware of the ideological nature of language through language, in other words, an author who works *within* language to work against language. Such a commitment is also a restatement on the part of the poet of the belief in the communicative and liberating power of poetry.

Significantly, in her book that came out with an equally significant title *The Twenty-First Century Modernism*, Perloff points to the affinity between Eliot’s early work and Language poets’ practice in that both parties regard poetry as “poiesis,” an activity that has to do with “making,” and “constructing” rather than “creating” (2002, pp. 8-9). It is true that both Language poets and Eliot agree that the poet as person bears no direct relation to the text he or she produces. But, even though Eliot sweeps the poet as person away from the text s/he produces, he hardly doubts that the poet is the agency

whose “conscious” and “deliberate” choices play a crucial role in the making of the poem. Language poets, on the other hand, seem to have exchanged the idea of the authorial subject with the subject formed within and by language. But, if the author is dead, if he/she is nothing more than a construction of language, “who, after all, controls the specific language operations in the text before us,” inquires Perloff, “who, after all, gets to determine the words in his or her poem”?¹⁰ This question becomes especially important when the claims of such poets as Bernstein, Andrews and others of “laying bare the devices,” disclosing the “anti-obvious” behind the visible by disrupting and displacing the elements of syntax and grammar of ordinary language within which reality is formed, by laying the stress on the materiality of language and the constructed nature of the text are taken into consideration. In addition, the authority ascribed to language fails to explain why a poet writes in the way s/he writes, neither can it offer a satisfying answer to the question of differences between styles of poets (Perloff, 1998, pp. 6-7). Such questions imply that Language poets may have driven the poet as person out of the text, but they have not quite slain the author. The author still stands behind the text with his/her belief in the communicative function of poetry and its power to produce resistance and change of mind and attitude in the reader. Their difference lies, however, in their insistence on remaining within the dynamics of language instead of submitting language to an authority from outside.

Thus, the real problem with the removal of the author as a human person from the text is that it may lead to the trap of the impersonal author-God prescribed by Eliot and the New Criticism. To murder the author as transcendental subject or to conceive him “on the basis of non-transcendental ontology” is not possible by “suppressing the author to absence, but by re-placing the author as a historical, biographical, psychological” being within the text (Burke, 1998, p. 114). Significantly, in her response to Bob Perelman’s “The Marginalization of Poetry,” Ann Lauterbach, herself a poet affiliated with language poetry, reminds the fellow Language poets of the fact that the denial of the author involves the possibility of moving toward the transcendental subject, just as the willingness to submit to language will reinforce the status quo and destroy the possibility of freedom from forms of linguistic oppression for both the writer and the reader:

¹⁰ p. 19. Here, Perloff refers to Silliman who remarks that “As the author, I get to determine unilaterally which words in what order will set forth the terms through which the experience shall occur” “After Language Poetry,” p. 19.

The rendering of sites of feeling
in such a way that structural or formal
aspects are foregrounded and the
subjective or expressive self is eclipsed.

... At such times,
the writing seems autobiographical, even
though the narrative is focused
more at the tip of the pen
then in the memory of the writer.

But is it possible that
this bracketing of emotion
along with constant emphasis on the present
here, nowness, materiality of language
resistance to narrativity and so forth might be a
*denial of mortality, literary as well as
actual, a fundamental resistance to change?*¹¹

Ron Silliman perceives that the denial of the presence of the author in the text as a human being has certain political implications as well. In the absence of the author, the power of presence seems to be conferred to a deified reader, but the reader without “history, biography, psychology,” is likewise pushed into an idealized absence (Silliman, 1998, p. 366). To reposition the author and the reader in such a way as to confirm their presence is to reclaim the status of literature against theory as well as to reclaim the power of presence assigned to critic who, in the absence of the author and reader, utilizes the text to display his/her knowledge and competence in applying theory to texts. Besides, if the text “calls the reader to action, questioning, self examination: to a reconsideration and a remaking of the habits automatisms, beliefs through which, and only through which, we see and interpret the world” as Bernstein so convincingly argues (1986, p. 595), then, it addresses a reader *with* “history, biography, psychology” calling this reader to action to free him/herself from being subjected to these powers. After all,

One does not write a poem without a conception of poetry. Each poet, each reader or listener perpetually constructs a subjective or private canon about which she or he can, and rightly should, feel enormously partisan. This experience is not just a compilation of a bibliography, but rather is a fully nuanced narrative: the order in which you come upon the writings of others makes all the difference in the world. (Silliman, 1998, p. 368).

¹¹ My emphases, <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/laut/htm>

In agreeing to remove the author from the text, Language poets have faced the dilemma of endorsing the author as transcendental signified. To reclaim the authorial presence in the text is not to reclaim the return of the author as the centralized speaking subject either. Interestingly, while explaining his perspective of the author as a presence in his/her work, Silliman notes the practices of the Projectivist poets, of Creeley in particular. For, the Projectivist poets confirm the authorial presence, and foreground author as an agency actively engaged in a “dialogue” between him/herself and his/her work,¹² or to put it as Silliman does, an author engaged in a “fluid, negotiable” relation to his/her work. His call for a return of the author, then, becomes the call for an interaction between the author and the text—or rather the writing and the written subject—within the dynamics of language. This prescription also issues an interaction between the author and the reader on the grounds of the poem. After all, the claim that poetry *can* “make things happen”¹³ still persists, but it requires the author and the reader as presences within the field of action.

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¹² Burke, 1998, p. 113.

¹³ Gelpi, 1990, p.9

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