

Poetry and Public Language

Poetry and Public Language

edited by

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Acknowledgements

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While we thank all who attended the conference, and indeed contributed to this book, we'll single out Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten. In planning the conference, the first thing we did was invite these two major figures in the movement known as Language Writing, which is perhaps by now the most influential and best documented manifestation of the avant-garde in late twentieth-century English-language poetry. A distinctive feature of the Language movement was its cooperative enabling social networks of public events and publications with magazines, book series, talks, performance events, programmes of readings and the deliberate painstaking and constructive contribution to the reception of the work made by several overlapping writing communities. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1984), gives some indication of the extent of that work. No authors of that movement have done more to encourage and promote the work of their peers than Hejinian and Watten with the editorial management of Tuumba Press, *This Magazine and Press*, and their joint editorship of *Poetics Journal*.

A conference requires considerable institutional investment and we gratefully acknowledge funding from The University of Plymouth, Faculty of Arts Research Committee, and Dartington College of Arts. A special mention for their encouragement and strategic support goes to Harry Bennett, Andrew Brewerton, David Coslett, Mike Hope and Jeremy Diggle. Our administration team of Susan Matheron, Anne Jervoise and Sarah Measures did a wonderful job and generous help on the spot came from David Caddy, Sarah Hopkins, Lucy Newton, Emily Critchley and Larry Lynch. A last and most dedicated word of thanks to Tony Frazer of Shearsman Books who, as well as being our publisher, supported the conference throughout with his stylish bookstall.

Preface

In Barry MacSweeney's poem *Jury Vet*, elements of a sado-masochistic fashion show are combined with a scandalous English Official Secrets Act trial of 1978. The coercive power of the secretive modern military state and the pressures on identity of commodity fetishism are not criticized but revelled in by MacSweeney. William Rowe is our guide in this slippery and seductive terrain.

In Allen Fisher's hybrid essay-poem 'Confidence in Lack', a correlation is established between Keats' negative capability and the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics, demonstrating the creative power of believing/not believing Plato and performing indirect poetic measurement via distant entangled particles. He uses this quantum method to propose (subject to funding) an intrinsic reflector from the ground up.

On 13 January 1972 in Derry/Londonderry, British soldiers shot 26 civil rights protestors. 13 were killed outright and another died four months later from his wounds. Many witnesses testified that all those injured were unarmed and five of the wounded were shot in the back. The first official tribunal of this incident exonerated the soldiers, including those in command. Andrew Browne's essay investigates Thomas Kinsella's poetic response to British government propaganda during the era known as 'the troubles'.

How does it alter our understanding of a poem to discover that it is written in gay code? How can we integrate conflicting and contested readings with our experience and our knowledge of poetic truth? Ian Davidson looks again at moving poems by Frank O'Hara.

'Could we have those trees cleared out of the way?' Lyn Hejinian responds to an early abstract Barrett Watten poem 'Mode Z', that uses negative dialectics in a non-depiction of landscape and identity. It is not Zukofsky, nor Oppen, nor Wordsworth: it is certainly not Eliot. The poem engages and deranges our expectations of poetry and the reading shows how that process is built out of historical consciousness even though the poem remains a kinetic meaning-engine turning in virtual space.

In Barrett Watten's 'The Expanded Object of the Poetic Field; or, What is a Poet/Critic?', he identifies one misleading or redundant

version of the poem as the universalized object of New Critical 'close reading' and contrasts it with a contemporary poetic writing that undermines modernist expectations of autonomous high-art authorship. He demonstrates a hybrid poetics of the assembly line and thus recuperates the genre-breaking works of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, either ignored or widely misunderstood by recent critics.

This collection of essays brings together 26 papers presented at *Poetry and Public Language: A Conference on Contemporary Poetry*. We have done our best to encourage an inclusive debate among a variety of viewpoints and different approaches to contemporary poetics. Most essays here explore the writings of recent and contemporary English or American poets who engage with avant-garde poetics, as conceived differently in different social and political circumstances, including poems by Charles Olson, J.H. Prynne, Frank O'Hara, Allen Fisher, Barry MacSweeney, Peter Reading, Tony Lopez, Tom Raworth, Robert Duncan, Rae Armantrout, Basil Bunting, and our conference keynote speakers: Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten. Other essays by Robin Peel on Emily Dickinson, Brendan Cooper on Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, and Christopher Orchard on Geoffrey Hill, explore how writers of different times and traditions have appropriated public language and contested political and aesthetic meanings. Both Philip Terry on the Oulipo Workshop of Potential Literature and Scott Thurston on the poetics of Watten, Bruce Andrews and Ira Lightman, seek productive opportunities to renew contemporary writing practice. Still further, select essays concentrate on the social experience of poetry and poetics, such as the development of the British and Irish Poets E-List described by Kit Fryatt, and the London Poetry Wars of the 1970s investigated by Robert Sheppard.

A number of essays address just what is meant by 'public language', and this line of enquiry fosters an interesting dynamic, whereby a particular methodology and mode of construction is investigated. As the essays make clear, public language may inhere in the stylized rhetorics and slick coinages of our consumer society, in the instrumental power of political and bureaucratic jargons, in the language of specialist or professional expert knowledges such as science, engineering and technology, in the media-driven newspeak of television, radio and

web, or even in echoes of recognizable literary works, whether well-known and loved allusions or hackneyed old hat. The list could go on, of course: it represents a poetry interested in sourcing material from outside the fabric of the immediate self. Where authors of the early twentieth century dealt in an allusive intertextuality, often compressed in a mythic frame, more recent authors seem fascinated to explore the possibilities of sampling wider non-literary sources and popular or even debased culture. This signals a practice which increasingly makes use of collage: fragmenting narrative lines, transfiguring rhetoric, shifting voices and registers. Where one poet might appropriate a 'swirling mix of unintimate vocabulary' (as Peter Middleton explores in Hejinian's recent book *The Fatalist*), another might focus their poem on a particular strain of language usage (as in Michael Kindellan's sense of Olson's use of Captain John Smith's 17th century book *Advertisements*).

These essays make clear that such a *modus operandi* has particular motives, and often we find such poetry being explored for its political concerns, as the critics Robert Hampson, Carrie Etter, Richard Kerridge, Hélène Aji, Matthew Chambers, Piers Hugill, and Catherine Martin find in the works of their chosen poets. That said, the more personal facets and concerns of a poetry which employs 'public language' are also emphasized, as in essays by Andrea Brady on early Raworth, Will Montgomery on Armantrout, and Susan Nurmi-Schomers and Kathy-Ann Tan on Hejinian.

Over and over, we find a useful tension between the public and the private spheres, which correlates with the tension between specialized and restricted language-sets and the more general language or 'ordinary language' that seeks to encompass the whole range of human knowledge and experience. There is by now a long-established serious doubt as to whether such a unified knowledge is possible and yet it is not clear how poetry is possible unless such an imaginative synthesis is available. The turn to 'public language'—as subject, as axis to understanding, as screen between the individual and the world—is explored, for better or worse, as a turn towards social experience.

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