Marjorie PERLOFF

FROM LANGUAGE POETRY TO THE NEW CONCRETISM: THE EVOLUTION OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Abstract: The article examines the trajectory of the Western avant-garde in the 20th century, in connection with the group formations characteristic of these movements. Movements such as the Russian avant-garde and European Dadaism are classified according to various criteria, and their rise and fall is traced. After a broad overview of avant-garde movements, the first part of the essay analyzes the cases of the modern avant-garde movement "Language Poetry". The article then goes on to detail the theoretical principles of the "language movement" founded in the late 1970s, and then explore how this radical movement has developed over the past twenty years. Language poetics, closely associated with French post-structuralist aesthetics and Marxist ideology, was gradually assimilated into the mainstream, and its stylistic features were absorbed into more traditional modes. The movement is now mostly over, but it has produced a number of important poets such as Susan Howe and Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian and Steve McCaffery. These poets now associate themselves outside the language movement they used to be part of and are eventually arriving their own styles. In the last part of the article, the author refers to the Latin American movement of concretism as a phenomenon that synthesizes the achievements of the Russian and European avant-garde and the American neo-avant-garde.

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ОТ ЯЗЫКОВОЙ ПОЭЗИИ ДО НОВОГО КОНКРЕТИЗМА: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ АВАНГАРДА

Аннотация: В статье исследуется траектория движения западного авангарда в XX в. в связи с групповыми формированиями, характерными для этих движений. Такие движения, как русский авангард и европейский дадаизм, классифицируются по различным критериям, прослеживается их взлет и падение. После широкого обзора авангардных движений в первой части эссе анализируются случаи современного авангардного движения «Языковая поэзия». Далее в статье подробно описываются теоретические принципы «языкового движения», основанного в конце 1970-х гг., а затем исследуется, как это радикальное движение развивалось за последние двадцать лет. Языковая поэтика, тесно связанная с французской постструктуралистской эстетикой и марксистской идеологией, постепенно ассимилировалась в мейнстрим, а ее стилистические особенности были поглощены более традиционными модусами. Движение в настоящее время в основном закончилось, но оно произвело на свет ряд важных поэтов, например, Сьюзан Хау и Чарльза Бернстина, Лин Хеджинян и Стива Маккаффери. Эти поэты обычно выходят за рамки движения, частью которого они были, и в конечном итоге находят свой собственный стиль. В последней части статьи автор обращается к латиноамериканскому движению конкретизма как течения, синтезирующего в себе достижения русского и европейского авангарда и американского неоавангарда.

Ключевые слова: авангард, сообщество, языковая поэзия, конкретизм.

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The term *avant-garde*, we sometimes forget, was originally a military metaphor: it referred to the front flank of the army, the forerunners in battle who paved the way for the rest (see [Calinescu 1987: 98–99]). The *avant-garde* is thus, by definition, ahead of its time. But not in an evolutionary sense, for the avant-garde is also invariably oppositional: in Peter Bürger's now famous words, "It radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art" [Bürger 1984: 51]. For Bürger, moreover, as for such earlier students of the avant-garde as Renato Poggioli [Poggioli 1968], the term *avant-garde* invariably refers to group formations — to those eager bands of brothers (or sisters) who collaborate to overturn the status quo of the bourgeois Establishment.

But the identification of *avant-garde* with movements is not without its problems. The artist usually considered the quintessential avant-gardist, Marcel Duchamp, never quite belonged to any group: as he told his young protégée Ettie Stettheimer in 1921, "From a distance these things, these Movements take on a charm that they do not have close up — I assure you" [Kuenzli, Naumann 1989: 220]. And the most radical American writer of the early twentieth century was one who disliked literary movements, belonged to no cénacle, and participated in no group manifestos or activities. I am thinking, of course, of Gertrude Stein, whose salon was frequented by many of the leading avant-gardists — Apollinaire, Picabia, Pound — but whose strongest allegiance was neither to other avant-garde women writers (most of whom she treated dismissively), nor to gay poets, much less to fellow Americans, but to that great modernist aggressively heterosexual male painter — Picasso. Was Stein then "avant-garde" without being part of a movement? Was Joyce? This last question is wittily raised in Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties*, where Lenin, Joyce, and Tristan Tzara, all living in Zurich in the mid 1910s, meet. Whose, in this case, is the "real" revolution? And, when we turn to the post-World War II avant-gardes, where do we place Beckett, whose works were originally perceived as shocking and incomprehensible? In what avant-garde movement did this extraordinary avant-gardist participate?

The concept of individual genius, it seems, dies hard. Does this mean that the term *avant-garde* has become meaningless? Not at all. The dialectic between individual artist and avant-garde groups is seminal to twentieth-century art-making. But not every "movement" is an avant-garde and not every avant-garde poet or artist is associated with a movement. What we need, it seems is a more accurate genealogy of avant-garde practices than

we now have. In what follows, I wish to consider a particular avant-garde movement that has remained powerful — but also quite controversial — ever since its inception in the early 1970s — namely, Language poetry, sometimes also placed, together with related practices, under the umbrella of "experimental writing" or "innovative poetry."

The trajectory of the Language movement raises particularly knotty questions about avant-garde practices. Are the "second-generation language poets," many of them graduates of the Buffalo Poetics program, founded by Charles Bernstein, themselves avant-gardists? Or is Language poetry already passé, replaced by a newer and genuinely different avant-garde formation? Or, as mainstream poets and critics insist, was the Language movement never more than a pretentious gesture — a movement most of whose members remain unrecognized by anthologists, unreviewed in the important periodicals, and passed over for all the literary prizes? And finally — to come back to the question I raised vis-à-vis Duchamp and Stein — is Language poetry in fact the achievement of a few poets who theorized its aims and methods, or would the turn toward an asemantic, asyntactic poetry have occurred in any case?

In order to frame this discussion, it will be useful to distinguish between the various avant-garde paradigms that have held sway in the course of the twentieth century. Two cautions are in order vis-à-vis the classification that follows. First, for reasons of expertise as well as space, I restrict myself to the (largely American and Western European) verbal and visual arts. And second, the classification is meant to be suggestive rather than definitive. Obviously other criteria would yield other genealogies.

Avant-Garde and Community

(1) The prototypical avant-garde was a movement that brought together genuinely like-minded artists, whose group commitment was to the overthrow of the dominant aesthetic values of their culture and to the making of artworks that were genuinely new and revolutionary — works that would be consonant with the new technology, science, and philosophy. The key example — and I take this to be the great avant-garde of the past century — was the Russian avant-garde from 1912 or so to the mid-twenties. The poets, painters, sculptors, photographers, makers of artist books and performances — Goncharova, Malevich, Tatlin, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky — later, Rodchenko, Lissitsky, Meyerhold — were in accord on basic avant-garde principles, especially in their drive toward a non-representational art and poetry and the concomitant emphasis

on *faktura* (the material base of the text or artwork), *sdvig* (the orientation toward the neighboring word), and *ostranenie* (defamiliarization). An artist like Malevich was identified with a larger group, and yet he also stood on his own as a great early Modernist artist, transcending that group identity. Note that his own "movement" Suprematism was a one-man operation: Malevich, after all, was the only Suprematist.

Surrealism and *German Expressionism* are examples of avant-gardes that similarly fused shared aesthetic values and individual development, but neither movement involved the rupture we associate with the Russian avant-garde. Surrealism was a natural outgrowth of Dada revolt and of Freudian theories of the subconscious, even as German Expressionism can increasingly be seen as continuous with the Decadence of the 1890s, Edvard Munch providing a key link between the two. But certainly such notable surrealists as André Breton and Max Ernst had a life outside and beyond their particular cenacles even as Kandinsky rapidly moved beyond his early Expressionist affiliations to create his own unique identity.

(2) A variation on #1 is the movement whose group ethos was strong and whose aesthetics and politics were highly integrated and articulated, but whose individual members did not come to be regarded as major modernist artists. Here Italian Futurism is a key example: although the visual artists — Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carra, Antonio St. Elia — produced outstanding and highly original works, and although the Italian Futurists more or less invented forms like the manifesto, performance art, and innovative typography, Futurism's literary contribution was weak. The movement's *chef d'école* F.T. Marinetti is known today as the inventor of *parole in libertà* and for the brilliant conjunctions of what he called "violence and precision" in his manifestos, but his poetry and fiction have never really caught on. In Italian Futurism the movement thus exceeded the artist. Its great strength was its "revolutionizing" of so many media — photography, film, architecture, poetry, fiction, drama. But its politics, which hardened in the course of the 20s into a proto-Fascism, undercut the reception of even these advances.

Zurich Dada had a related trajectory. We think of the Cabaret Voltaire as producing the quintessential avant-garde, the ultimate contrarian spirit of revolt in all its wit and wonder, but however colorful and intriguing the personalities, performances, and manifestos of its polyglot expatriate members — Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck — these Dadaists have never been taken quite seriously *as poets*. When, at war's end, the movement broke up, many of the individuals floundered, while others

like Hans Arp were soon associated with other movements. Meanwhile, the term Hanover Dada refers to the work of a single great artist, Kurt Schwitters, whereas Berlin Dada, now very popular in academic circles because of its radical left politics, is hardly "Dada" at all, the graphics and paintings of John Heartfield, Raoul Haussmann, and George Grosz are vicious satires on war and postwar capitalism that carry forward the lessons of German Expressionism. Didactic and ideological in intent, these works have left behind the anarchy and non-sensicality of the Cabaret Voltaire.[1]

(3) The antithesis of a community like Zurich Dada is the avant-garde in which a congerie of disciples and acolytes gathers around a central charismatic figure. New York Dada, which I spoke of earlier, is a case in point. Guy Debord's Situationism was another — a movement that would have been nothing without its leader. Imagism and Vorticism, sometimes included under the avant-garde rubric, would have been negligible without the presence of Ezra Pound and possibly H.D. in the former, Wyndham Lewis in the latter. As soon as Pound's Imagist credo had been diluted into what he called "amygisme" (for Amy Lowell), Pound blew the whistle on the use of the term and founded, together with Lewis, Vorticism, a movement now generally regarded as a footnote to Italian Futurism. But Pound, H.D., and Lewis emerged as important individual writers, who soon went on to produce ambitious works by no means covered by the Imagist or Vorticist label.

(4) A fourth kind of avant-garde formation is the geographical. Black Mountain was a movement that depended on residence at Black Mountain College for its definition. Many fascinating artists passed through Black Mountain — from Joseph Albers to Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, from Buckminster Fuller to John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Allan Kaprow. The problem of geographical definition is that the avant-gardists in question had, as critics have now noted, little by way of a shared aesthetic. Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley were both followers of William Carlos Williams, but in neither case does the poetry have affinities with, say, the more political and narrative work of Ed Dorn, who was also an Olson student at the college. For a few years, the *Black Mountain Review* brought these poets together, but their group impetus was never strong.

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[1]   In the October 105 special Dada issue, the emphasis is largely on German Dada, and specifically on its politics. As such, the Dada label seems increasingly beside the point. Or, as in the case of Hal Foster's "Dada Mime," a reconsideration of performance in Zurich Dada, the case is made for a "dehumanization" that leads inevitably to the dehumanization of Naziism.

A more prominent example of avant-garde as geographic community was the so-called New York School. As a designation for the abstract expressionist painters from Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko to Helen Frankenthaler and Franz Kline, all of whom were living and working in New York in the fifties, the term New York School makes sense, as it does for the Frank O'Hara circle of poets — Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and a large contingent of second generation New York schoolers like Ron Padgett, Ted Berrigan, and Bernadette Mayer. But New York is one thing, avant-garde another. David Lehman's controversial book *The Last Avant-Garde* [Lehman 1998] makes the case for O'Hara, Koch, Ashbery, and Schuyler (he omits Barbara Guest) as avant-gardists on the strength of their new colloquialism, spontaneity, defiance of fixed meters and forms, and the "new" relationship of the verbal to the visual arts. But both New York painting and poetry were soon seen as squarely in the Romantic and Modernist tradition. The New York school did not attack art as a bourgeois institution, nor did it call into question the centrality of painting and lyric poetry among the media. Ashbery, for that matter, always rejected the New York label, and his own poetry was soon seen as closer to Stevens, Eliot, and Auden than to the neo-Dada often attributed to New York school poetry. As for Lehman's term "*last* avant-garde," many critics, myself included, have objected strenuously to the word "last," whose foreclosure of all further innovation is designed as a thinly veiled attack on Language poetry. Like the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance poets, the New York school was — and remains — an important community, but not, either by intention or outcome, a fully-fledged avant-garde.

(5) A variant on the communitarian model is the school or workshop, whose cardinal example today is *Oulipo,* the *Ouvroir de la littérature potentiell*e*,* founded in France in 1960 by the French author Raymond Queneau and the mathematical historian François Le Lionnais. Made up of mathematicians as well as writers, the group assigned itself the task of how mathematical structures might be used in literary creation. This idea was soon broadened to include all highly restrictive procedural methods, like the palindrome and lipogram, that are strict enough to play a decisive role in determining what their users write. The most notorious example of this approach is Georges Perec's novel, *La Disparition* (*A Void*)*,* written without a single appearance of the letter *e.* Oulipo is thus a *group* project that observes particular rules and prohibitions. At the same time, its leading writers — Georges Perec and Jacques Roubaud — have produced highly individual work. Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* (*Life a User's Manual*),

while based on Oulipo principles, is a picaresque hyperreal novel that speaks to readers who have never heard of the Paris workshop.

Oulipo is a bona-fide avant-garde in that it has, from its inception, radically questioned the very possibility of poetry or fiction as self-expression or invention. But its parameters are necessarily narrow, and the work is largely confined to the verbal medium, even though there are now subgroups with names like *Oupeintpo*, *Ouphopo*, and *Oumupo*.[2]

An Oulipo analogue on the visual arts side is Fluxus, which dates, like Oulipo, from the sixties. Like Oulipo, Fluxus was a movement bent on making "art" rooted in scientific and philosophical ideas, but codification was not its métier. Then too Fluxus was an international movement, fusing Dada and Zen elements to assert that all media and disciplines are fair game for combination and fusion, that indeed anything can be considered "art." As such, Fluxus objects and performances would appear to be the antithesis of Oulipo villanelles and lipograms, but in fact Fluxus principles, its list of what Pound called "Don'ts," as embodied in the work of artists and poets like George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, Jackson Mac Low, and Dick Higgins — may well be just as rigid as Oulipo ones. But in Fluxus, as in Dada, the movement has proved to be stronger than its individuals.

(6) In recent years, ideological and identity-based movements have sometimes been labeled "avant-garde": for example, the Black Arts movement, the feminist performance art of the '70s, or the "new" Asian-American poetries. But the "breakthrough" of such movements tends to be short-lived, the aim of the groups concerned being ironically counter-avant-garde in their drive to win acceptance within the larger public art sphere. Once received into the canon, as has been the case with such representative figures as Teresa Hak Kyung Cha or Amiri Baraka in contemporary poetry circles, group identity is largely discarded.

(7) Finally — and largely antithetical to all of the above — is the movement that doesn't see itself as a movement at all but comes to be considered one by outsiders and later generations because its artists share a particular aesthetic and possibly a politics as well. In the 60s in New York, there was a loose congerie of artists, composers, dancers, and poets more prominent than the second generation of the New York School although there was some overlap between the two. John Cage, who has already been mentioned vis-à-vis Black Mountain, and who was certainly the presiding

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spirit of Fluxus, the movement that was at least partially born in his seminars at the New School, was the center of an avant-garde that included Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Morton Feldman, David Tudor, Jackson Mac Low, and, on its margins, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery. The Swedish concrete poet/artist Oyvind Fahlström, who came to New York and collaborated with Rauschenberg, belongs to this group. The Cage circle was primarily, but not exclusively, a gay movement but its sexual thematics were heavily coded. Today, the conceptual artists in question have achieved a certain prominence but, with the exception of the painters and possibly Merce Cunningham, not quite full acceptance. A decade after his death, Cage (born 1912) is still considered a charlatan in many art circles even as Feldman and Tudor remain coterie composers, adored by their champions but unknown by the wider concert audience. To paraphrase Pound, this is an avant-garde that has stayed avant-garde.

"Word Order = World Order"?

What, then, of the Language movement, which was the most prominent American poetic avant-garde of the '80s and '90s? The genealogy of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, as Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein called their now famous little mimeo magazine, first published in 1978, must be understood in the context of the prevailing poetry culture of the time. In the U.S., it was the moment of burgeoning Workshop activity, poet after poet writing his or her "sincere," sensitive, intimate, speech-based lyric, expressing particular nuances of emotion. Here, for example, is the prize-winning poet and a professor at the University of Virginia, Gregory Orr, memorializing his mother in a poem called "Haitian Suite":

> Hunched over a desk
> in another house, I hear
> the curtains rustle.
> Again she stands behind me,
> quiet and tall as a lamp,
> while I push clumsy words
> around on a page, trying
> to make them fit. Closing
> my eyes, I feel a summer
> breeze warm as breath cross
> my face, coming all the way
> from a grave in Haiti.

The poem's mode is an attenuated Romanticism, its Wordsworthian premise being that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility. But in "Haitian Suite," the emotion communicated — grief for one's dead mother — is rather pat, and it is too transparently put into what are modestly called the "clumsy words" of the poem — clumsiness being appropriate because it evidently underscores the depth of the poet's actual feelings. Accordingly, the verse must be "natural" and "free," the syntax that of the declarative sentence, the language accessible, and the imagery concrete ("I hear / the curtains rustle"). Metaphor is used sparingly but exactingly: the mother's ghost is "quiet and tall as a lamp," because, of course, she provided the light that helped the poet to become a man.

The agonism of the avant-garde is usually directed, not at an earlier generation as would seem logical, but against the complacencies of one's own. Barrett Watten, almost exactly the age of Gregory Orr and a graduate of the Iowa Writing Program, was living in Oakland in the early seventies and was editing, first with Robert Grenier, then after 1973 on his own, the little magazine *This*, whose very title suggests that poetry is not made of images but of words — and unlikely words at that. *This* published Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson and Steve Benson, Rae Armantrout and Lyn Hejinian. Its presiding spirit was a slightly older poet first associated with the New York school, whose radically asyntactical and densely semantic poetry became a model for the younger group — namely Clark Coolidge. One of Watten's early essays, reprinted in his *Total Syntax* [Watten 1985], was a piece on the new syntactic possibilities raised by the work of Coolidge, Silliman, Benson, and Robert Smithson.

For Watten and his fellow Bay Area poets, the impetus for a "new" poetics was primarily political. In a recent essay called "The Turn to Language and the 1960s," Watten argues that Language poetry owed its birth to the Berkeley Free Speech movement and the political revolution it unleashed. The valorization of speech, first a positive sign of the new counterculture, became dubious as writers came to regard natural speech as adequate to the conveyance of an agonistic politics. Even such talented poets as Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov, Watten posits, tried to express their horror at the Vietnam War in direct, experiental speech forms — forms that separated subjects as experiencing "selves" from the "history" they were trying to represent. By contrast, the younger poets of Watten's own new movement understood that poetry must have a materialist base, that language and syntax must do the poem's work. As Watten put it, "The language-centered poetics of the 1970s permitted the recovery of a

totalized *outside* that was a casualty of the conflict between expression and representation in the 1960s" [Watten 2002: 183].

Ingenious as this argument is, it does not withstand scrutiny. True, the poetry of Ginsberg, Levertov, Merwin, and other 60's poets was rooted in a lyric subjectivity and transparency that could not quite come to terms with the atrocities perceived to be taking place. But Watten writes as if there had been no horrors to represent before the Vietnam War, whereas great war poetry had always taken what Watten calls the "constructivist" route. Consider Khlebnikov, whose last poems, dealing with the brutal famine produced by the Russian Civil War in the early 1920s, are short, ironic imagist lyrics that capture the horrors of war only too well. Or George Oppen, the Objectivist poet who has been one of the chief precursors of the Language movement, and whose long political/philosophical poem "Of Being Numerous" neither eradicates the speaking subject nor the possibilities of normative syntax.

If Watten's argument is overstated, it nevertheless testifies to the characteristic avant-garde need to transform one's immediate adversary — in this case the "natural" speech-based poetry dominant in the sixties — into a permanent condition and to make the case for one's own oppositional circle as having some sort of *avant-garde purity* and *priority*. "We were," so to speak, "the first that ever burst / into that silent sea." A similar problem occurs — and I shall come back to this poin t — with the claim made by language poets that theirs was a unique attack on the capitalist reification and commodification of the sign, that only the blasting apart of the word and its referent could convey a meaningful critique of capitalism.

The Watten-Silliman circle did not yet use the term *Language poetry*, which officially came into being with the launch of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1978 and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* in 1984.

Here the principles of this particular avant-garde were laid out just as squarely as Marinetti had promulgated his call for the destruction of syntax and the abolition of all ego psychology in his pre-World War I manifestos, although the Language poets, operating in a more belated, self-conscious age, gave their prescriptions a more theoretical base than the Futurists could muster.

The first of the "Language" principles is perhaps most clearly articulated in Charles Bernstein's "Stray Straws and Straw Men" (1977), which follows the Futurist format of numbered propositions so as to launch a witty attack on the aesthetic of "the natural look" then dominant in poetry:

17. Take it this way: I want to just write — let it come out — get in touch with some natural process — from brain to pen — with no interference of typewriter, formal pattern. & it can seem like the language itself — having to put it into words — any kind of fixing a version of it — gets in the way. That I just have this thing inside me — silently — unconditioned by the choices I need to make when I write — whether it be to write it down or write on. So it is as if language itself gets in the way of expressing this thing, this flow, this movement of consciousness.

But there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it. Its conditions always interpose themselves: a particular set of words to choose from (a vocabulary), a way of processing those words (syntax, grammar): the natural condition of language...

Bernstein, the most significant of the Language poets — indeed the movement's very engine — had studied Wittgenstein with Stanley Cavell at Harvard, and his notion that "there are no thoughts except through language," is a version of Wittgenstein's "*The limits of language* mean the limits of my world" [Wittgenstein 1992: § 5.6], that "Language is not *contiguous* to anything else" [Wittgenstein 1980: 112]. The articles of faith of 60's poetry — Olson's "Form is never more than the extension of content" and Ginsberg's "First thought, best thought" — were thus overturned in a new call for poetry as making, construction — the importance of each and every word and especially of word order. But unlike the New Criticism, which demanded unified and centered structure, the "aura around a bright clear centre," as Reuben Brower [Brower 1951] called it, the constructivist aesthetic of Language poetry insisted on the *making* process itself, in all its anti-closure, incompletion, ad indeterminacy.

"Stray Straws and Straw Men" was first published as part of a symposium called "The Politics of the Referent," edited by Steve McCaffery, published in the Canadian journal *Open Letter* in 1977 and reprinted by Andrews and Bernstein as *Language Supplement Number One* in June 1980. McCaffery's own essay, dramatically titled "The Death of the Subject," provides a second major principle. "There is a group of writers today," McCaffery begins, "united in the feeling that literature has entered *a crisis of the sign* ... and that the foremost task at hand — a more linguistic and philosophic then 'poetic' task — is to demystify the referential fallacy of language." "Reference," he adds, "is that kind of blindness a window makes of the pane it is, that motoric thrust of the word which takes you out

of language into a tenuous world of the other and so prevents you seeing what it is you see" [McCaffery 1977: 1].

Such a thrust — the removal of what McCaffery calls later in the essay "the arrow of reference" — is essential because "language is above all else a system of signs and... writing must stress its semiotic nature through modes of investigation and probe, rather than mimetic, instrumental indications."

Here, in a nutshell, is the animating principle of much of the poetry to come: poetic language is not a window, a transparent glass to be *seen through* in pursuit of the "real" objects outside it but a system of signs with its own semiological relationships. To put it another way, "Language is material and primary and what's experienced is the tension and relationship of letters and lettristic clusters, simultaneously struggling towards, yet refusing to become, significations." McCaffery himself points to the Russian Formalists, to Wittgenstein, Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida as sources of his theory, and indeed language poetics, in this first stage, owes a great debt to French poststructuralism.[3] And McCaffery sounds a Derridean note when he declares that "the empirical experience of a grapheme replaces what the signifier in a word will always try to discharge: its signified and referent." Indeed, in poetry the signifier is always "superfluous," overloaded with potential meanings and hence more properly a *cipher* [McCaffery 1986: 4].

The twin rejection of poetry as natural speech (Bernstein) and of poetry as a vehicle for the communication of a set of external meanings animates much of the theoretical writing of other language poets. In the Introduction to his *In the American Tree* (1986), Ron Silliman notes that the poets he has included in his anthology want to "renew verse itself, so that it might offer readers the same opacity, density, otherness, challenge and relevance persons find in the 'real' world." And again, "What a poem is actually made of [is] 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: xvi]. "Where once one sought a vocabulary for ideas," writes Lyn Hejinian in "If Written is Writing," "now one seeks ideas for vocabularies" [Andrews, Bernstein 1984: 29]. And in "The Rejection of Closure": "Language

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[3]   Indeed, McCaffery's thesis can be understood as an extreme version of Roman Jakobson's axiom that in poetry the sign is never equivalent to its referent and the corollary that poetry is language that is somehow extraordinary. See [Jakobson 1987: 62–94].

discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say" [Hejinian 2000: 48].[4]

What Bernstein has dismissed as the "*transom theory of communication*" (the "two-way wire with the message shuttling back and forth in blissful ignorance of its transom")[5] is thus emphatically rejected. There are two corollaries, one Barthean, one Marxist-Althusserian. "Language-centered writing," McCaffery tells us, "involves a major alteration in textual roles: of the socially defined functions of writer and reader as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis" [McCaffery 1986: 3]. And again, "The text becomes the communal space of a labour, initiated by the writer and extended by the second writer (the reader). ...The old duality of reader-writer collapses into the one compound function, and the two actions are permitted to become a simultaneous experience within the activity of the engager" [McCaffery 1986: 8]. "Reading" is thus "an alternative or additional writing of the text." The "open text," as Hejinian puts it, "by definition is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive" [Hejinian 2000: 43].[6] Indeed — and here the Marxist motif kicks in — "to remove the arrow of reference," to "short-circuit the semiotic loop" [McCaffery 1986: 9] is a political as well as an aesthetic act. For, in Silliman's words, "Under capitalism, reference is transformed (deformed) into referentiality" [Andrews, Bernstein 1984: 125]. In "Text and Context," Bruce Andrews reinforces this notion, dismissing referentiality as the misguided "search for the pot at the end of the rainbow, the commodity or ideology that brings fulfillment" [McCaffery 1986: 20].

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[4]   This essay was first published in *Poetics Journal* 4, "Women and Language" Issue (May 1984).

[5]   Charles Bernstein, Introduction to "Language Sampler," *Paris Review,* no. 86 (Winter 1982).

[6]   We should note that such definitions of reader construction are somewhat simplified versions of poststructuralist theory. For Foucault, the important thing is that the reader can see through a given text and detect its ideological determinations and hence its "true" thrust; for Barthes the emphasis is on imaginative reinvention as in his reading of Balzac's Sarrasine in his S/Z. Neither Foucault or Barthes meant that the author wasn't responsible for the text he had created or that it was authored by a "community" rather than the individual poet.

Our public language, so the argument goes, is so debased, so formulaic, so cliché-ridden, that poetry must resist its reifaction by blowing apart its phraseology and syntax, to reassert the complexity and untranslatability of poetic language.[7]

The four principles I have cited — (1) poetry is not "natural" speech but, on the contrary, something carefully constructed; (2) poetry rejects the "referential fallacy" in favor of the play of signifiers that are suggestive and multivalent; (3) poetry relinquishes its author's control over the text, functioning instead as a "communal space of labor'; and (4) poetry has no place for the direct communication of information, which is the hallmark of the commodity fetish — were, of course, never designed to be as doctrinaire as I have made them sound here. There was always a good deal of variation and controversy within the Language community and especially between its East and West Coast branches. Still, these basic principles give the movement its general tone, and they are usually accompanied by two further axioms, although these are less intrinsic than practical.

First poetry could — and often should — be written as prose — not ordinary prose, of course, but what Silliman named "the New Sentence" best exemplified in his own *Ketjak* and *Tjanting* as well as in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, where a given sentence never "follows" logically or sequentially from its predecessor and yet is related to all the other sentences by careful orchestration of leitmotifs, phrases, and numerical constraints. "New sentences," as Bob Perelman explains Silliman's concept, "are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. ...the new sentence arises out of an attempt to redefine genres; the tension between parataxis and narrative is basic. Among other things, Silliman wanted to escape the problems of the novel, which for him were of a piece with the larger problems of capitalism" [Perelman 1995: 61].

Perelman, writing in the mid-90s, acknowledges that the latter generalization won't really hold: "Today parataxis can seem symptomatic

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[7] My own *Radical Artifice* elaborates on this argument. But it is only fair to say that the argument has come under fire from Marxist critics themselves. Thus the British critic Rod Mengham has observed that the equation of reference to the commodity fetish is "too neat and too constricting to let the poetry do very much work of its own — it reduces the act of writing to a blind act of sabotage repeated an infinite number of times, so that, although the resulting text seems difficult at first, its probable effect is much simpler than the interlocking series of relations it is trying to replace. The 'Language' writers are so fascinated by the conceptual framework it is their task to critique that they find it hard to free their thought from its shadow." [Mengham 1989: 116].

of late capitalism rather than oppositional. Ads where fast cuts from all 'walks of life' demonstrate the ubiquity and omniscience of AT&T are paratactic" [Perelman 1995: 62]. Still, he posits, the "new sentence" is a useful tool: "First, it is arbitrary, driving a wedge between any expressive identity of form and content." And "to use the sentence as basic unit rather than the line is to orient the writing toward ordinary language use" [Perelman 1995: 65]. In breaking up the continuity of lyric voice as well as the "smooth narrative plane" [Perelman 1995: 78], the "new sentence" has been, so Perelman posits, an important element in language poetics.

A second ancillary principle, implicit in all those I have cited thus far, is that poetry incorporates its own poetics, that it has a theoretical base. Perelman's own "Marginalization of Poetry," Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption," Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* and *Melville's Marginalia*, Rosmarie Waldrop's *Reluctant Gravities* — all these are works that use poetic figuration and structure to present a particular poetics as well. As such, *theorypo* or *poetheory* as we might call it, was positioned as the very antithesis of the epiphanic lyric of the Writing Workshop.

Language Poetry thus presented itself as a decisive rupture with the poetic status quo, a distinctive way of Making It New. In the hands of its main practitioners, it produced a series of long poems that are now classics of a sort, from Bernstein's "Dysraphism" to Hejinian's *My Life,* Silliman's *Tjanting*, McCaffery's *Lag,* and Susan Howe's *Thorow*.[8] Meanwhile, a host of other poets contributed short essays and reviews to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and to such related journals as *Roof, Hills*, *Jimmy and Lucy's House of K*, *Temblor*, *Raddle Moon, Writing*, and *How(ever)* (now the online journal *How To*). And anthologies like Silliman's *In the American Tree* (1986) and Mary Margaret Sloan's *Moving Borders* (1998) append a back section with sizable statements of poetics by the authors included. Thus, although Language Poetry has never gained acceptance from the mainstream press — even Bernstein has hardly ever been reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* and never in *The New York Review of Books* — and has been largely kept out of the loop of the prize, award, and fellowship cycle,[9] its impact has been far-reaching. Students from Finland and Germany, Portugal and Japan have come to Buffalo to study in the Poetics Program and have returned to

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8 I discuss these in [Perloff 1990; Perloff 1992; Perloff 2002].

9 No language poet has thus far won a MacArthur Fellowship. A few — Bernstein, Howe, Michael Palmer — have won Guggenheims and smaller prizes, but at this level the Language poets cannot compete with such of their contemporaries as Ann Lauterbach, Jorie Graham, Carl Phillips, etc.

their own communities with new modes and strategies. In Australia and New Zealand, as in Brazil, Language Poetry became a kind of watchword and is perhaps the key influence on the "new" poetries of these nations. In the U.S, UK, and Canada, *My Life*, Howe's *Thorow*, Bernstein's *With Strings*, and McCaffery's *Panopticon* are taught in college classrooms, and a number of scholarly books — by Ann Vickery, Juliana Spahr, Elizabeth Frost — already appeared on feminist language poetries and other facets of the "new poetics." Graduates of the Poetics Program and related programs at Brown, Berkeley, and the University of Pennsylvania have infiltrated the university literature and creative Writing classrooms and are accordingly introducing Language poets to undergraduates who assume, not surprisingly, that these poets have always been there.

The big lesson learned from Language Poetry, I would argue, has been that, contemporary pop culture notwithstanding, *poetry matters*, that it is not just a craft for sensitive spirits who wish to express themselves but an *intellectual* discipline dealing with the most pressing philosophical and cultural issues of the day. Take the opening poem of Charles Bernstein's new book *Topsy-Turvy*, "Shelter in Place":

> It's no go from the get
> go, strumming a mordant
> medley from the old days
> when we danced with
> abandon. Now we are
> abandoned, God's
> silence deafens us
> to each other, and the
> fiddlers diddle a
> familiar tune. Familiar
> and deadly. Wake
> up say those still
> still small voices:
> the Anthrobscene
> is playing just north
> of here and this is
> just a taste of
> what's to come.

Here Bernstein plays on every truism and bit of jargon spoken today by the well-meaning like Dr. Anthony Fauci: we are supposed to "shelter in place," but of course there is no shelter; it's "no go from the get/go," and dancing "with abandon" has given way to man's real abandonment by the God he believes in. The "still small voice[s] of conscience cannot counter the "Anthrobscene" [Anthropocene]m which has become some sort of film "playing just north / of here" but the frightening climate change really IS playing "north of/ here" and what's going on (the pandemic) is "just a taste of / what's to come." Fiddlers diddle the familiar tune — familiar but we can't seem to do a thing about it and the inane rhyming (no go/ from the get go") screeches on.

"Shelter in Place" beautifully objectifies its material: everything is shown rather than said by a lyric "I." But Bernstein may well be an exception: by 2020, the case against "the natural look," the authoritative Cartesian subject, the transparency of meaning, and the use of "old-fashioned "lineation" (much less meter) rather than the "new sentence" have too often become mere items to be ticked off on the "How To Make It New" list: the "innovative" writing produced in the Workshop — now often a theory workshop as well as a place to practice one's poetic craft — has become just as tedious and formulaic as the Workshop poetry it had once spurned. Indeed, the epithets *innovative, experimental*, *alternative*, *radical* — not to mention *avant-garde* — are now so reified in their own right that one sometimes finds oneself longing for a transparent nature lyric or love sonnet, preferably one with lots of rhyme, repetition, and refrain.

How did things come to such a pass? At the most immediate level, the problem is simply temporal: no avant-garde cénacle can keep up its momentum for three decades. Then, too, the absorption of Language poetry into the academy inevitably meant that the application of its principles would be codified, watered down, and misunderstood by what Pound called "*the diluters*," those who follow the *inventors* and *masters* of a given mode, "produc[ing] something of lower intensity, some flabbier variant" [Pound 1954: 23]. But there is something else. By 2000 or so, *the fighting principles of Language poetry — principles I have here been outlining — ran into the juggernaut of Political Correctness*. The demand for inclusiveness, for more women and especially minority poets, meant that candidates began to qualify as bona fide "language poets" on what were in fact extra-aesthetic grounds. Whereas a related movement like Oulipo never changed its rules, demanding a particular expertise and outlook from all its members, Language poetry was now pressed to be inclusive, not

to mention polite, tolerant, and fair-minded. Readings began to balance Language Poet X with mainstream poet Y, established poet X with novice Y, even as publication series like the University of California Poetry Series felt they had to offset the difficulties of Lyn Hejinian with the more transparent lyrics of Carol Snow, and so on. Something for everybody (we hope!): this is the mantra.

How does this turn of events compare to the trajectory of other avant-gardes? In the early twentieth century, the avant-garde was likely to meet its dissolution in the face of war or some form of political crackdown. The Russian avant-garde, for instance, was the victim of the revolution it had ironically worked to bring about: with the ascendancy of the Culture Commissars in the early twenties, avant-garde production all but ceased, although certain individual artists like Lissitsky and Rodchenko worked out ways of accommodation and special coding. The Italian avant-garde dissolved in the course of World War I, in which such leading figures as Boccioni and Sant'Elia were killed. Futurism after the war either moved in the direction of Fascism or dissolved into a polite and meaningless salon painting that no one could fault. As for Zurich Dada, at the end of the enforced exile its members underwent during the war, the movement gave way to a Paris version that soon turned from the cult of anarchy, agonism, and chance to the Surrealist concern with the dream states, automatic writing, and Communist politics.

Again, geographical avant-gardes like the New York School or the so-called San Francisco Renaissance transform themselves as their actual milieu changes. The New York of Frank O'Hara, where poets easily moved in and out of this or that cold water flat and somehow found employment to support their poetry habit, is long gone, and San Francisco is now a major corporate center of the computer and internet industry. From the vantage point of these movements, Language poetry has lasted a rather long time, propped up primarily by the once suspect university that now fosters so many of its readings, performances, and publications. But such patronage has had its price: what we might call the curricular avant-garde has bred a second generation that seems –at least to me — -to be spinning its wheels, try as it may to separate itself from its more successful precursors. Influence does not, in any case, go in a straight line: second-generation New York abstract expressionists, for example, were soon eclipsed by artists, whether Pop, Minimalist, Conceptualist or Color Field, who revolted against its very principles. The lesson for students of the avant-garde would seem to be that whatever the "new wave" proves to be, it is not likely to be a

continuation of the avant-garde — in this case, of Language poetry — as we know it.

Indeed, such Language issues as the repudiation of the "natural look" no longer have the urgency they once had. As mediated by the internet, no poem can be fully "natural"; on screen, it is always already simulated and simulatable. In the same vein, the debate about reader construction (who owns the text?) becomes irrelevant, the reader having the "privilege" of transforming any given text into something else. Even a forwarded email is no longer the "real thing," for the forwarder can edit it at will, all the while presenting it as belonging to its original author. The resistance to commodified language thus becomes less interesting than the ability to cite that language and "write through" it or to play it off against other discourses.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the difference the new digital technologies have made to all writing — poetic writing included. Language poetry, however agonistic vis-à-vis the mainstream, was, like the other poetries of the time, a **page-based phenomenon**. Whether the poems in question were long or short, in verse or in prose, they were of course poems to be *read* and digested in the privacy of one's own space. True, these poems were and continue to be read publicly, but ironically the poetry reading has itself become a way of perpetuating what Bernstein called the transom theory of communication: the poet in front of the room at the lectern, leafing through his or her recently published volumes and new notebook drafts, reads to those *others* who are in the audience. Digital discourse is fast making this mode obsolete, for one can now produce one's own temporal and spatial environment for the reception of the reading in question, even as the "look" of the poetry being read becomes very important on the computer screen.

Seeing, hearing, performing: in the internet age these take on a rather different valence from the poetries of the eighties. The complex semantic charge of much Language poetry, for example, downplayed the concomitant complexities of sound or visual structure, and by the mid-90s, younger "experimental" poets, trained to believe that metrics and traditional genres were old-hat, produced countless free-verse or prose poems, whose visual and aural potential remained largely undeveloped. Meanwhile, as websites like Kenneth Goldsmith's *ubu.com* make clear, a new poetics is emerging that traces its genealogy, not, say, to the Objectivists, as was the case with Language poetry, but to Brazilian Concrete Poetry of the 50s, to the procedural poetics of Oulipo, and to sound poetry from Kurt Schwitters to

Henri Chopin. In Russia, a prime early example (not yet digital) would be Dmitri Prigov's *poetrygrams, stikhogrammi* of the late 1970s–1980s, each a single piece of paper, hand-typed, inspired by Mayakovsky's breaking the rules of the printed page. Often the words become intentionally illegible so as to suggest the monotony and prevalence of state rhetoric. *Wherever the Motherland May Send Us*, for example, is written in transliterated form from the original Cyrillic and reads: "Wherever the Motherland may send us / Proudly we'll keep our word," cited from Mikhail Isakovsky's popular war song of 1948 entitled *Song of the Labor Reserves.*

Recent works by the Brazilian Concretists enlarge on the possibilities of verbal/vocal/visual design. Let me give you an example from Augusto de Campos whose early aphoristic poems like VIA VAIA and LUXO/LIXO have become part of the poetic vocabulary.

In May 1992 — now thirty years ago! — I received an enthusiastic letter from Augusto, detailing his new interest in the Macintosh computer and all that digital activity could do for poets and artists:

> I myself have a small Macfamily "workstation" (computer, scanner and printer) and am becoming more or less macintoxicated. . . As you see, I am each day more involved with computers. In fact, although I am sure that knowledge of new technologies by itself is no warranty of great art, I could say, invoking J[ames] J[oyce's] verbivocovisual blessings ("door always open. For a new era's day"), I have the presentment of the futuriment that — in this *fin-de-siécle* pressure of [the] present — the future of futurisms is *there*. Et tout le reste est littérature. . .
>
> With all my ☀□☀□☀□ wishes,
> Augusto

In the *fin de siècle* of the 1990s, Augusto could not have anticipated how dark the early decades of the new century would turn out to be, beginning with 9/11 /2001 and culminating, at our own moment, in the spectre of dictatorship in both our countries. Technology in itself is indeed "no warranty for great art." And yet... the imaginative, inventive Augusto has continually renewed himself, working with the range of new media. From the short concrete poems of *Noigandres* in 1953, to the *Popcretos* of the 1960s and the *despoesia* (unpoetry) of the *1990s,* to the astonishing performance pieces — language, music, film, graphic art — of the 2000s, and most recently the beautiful translation miniatures he calls *plaquettes,* Augusto has never stopped innovating and looking to the future.

I want to illustrate Augusto's uncanny ability to renew himself by looking at what I have called a "differential" text — that is, a text that morphs from one medium or genre to another, creating new semantic possibilities.

Cidade would be one example, *Codigo* another. But let me here look at how Augusto's minimalist concrete poem, "The Whale's Night Song" ("Canção noturna da baleia"),[10] became, more than a decade after its composition, the germ of the visual-musical piece *Call Me Moby*, performed by Augusto with his innovative composer-performer son Cid de Campos.[11]

Canção Noturna da Baleia first published in *Despoesia* in 1994, alludes to the famous German poem *Fishes Nachtgesang* by Christian Morgenstern, which consists of alternate long and short vowel scansion marks, as used in Latin and Greek poetry. Morgenstern's poem is mimetic: its shape outlines the torso of a fish, and the scansion marks have been said to signify heartbeats, movements through the water, and so on.

Augusto's *Canção Noturna* is quite different: it occupies a single square black page, the grid made of 17 horizontal lines, each containing 23 spaces. In every even line (2, 4, ...) the spaces hold 23 white lower-case *m's*, whereas the nine odd lines, beginning with line 1, bear a set of spaced letters constituting words, embedded — and almost buried — in a sea of further identical white *m*'s. The 9 lines of text contain a total of 29 consecutive words, with marked line breaks; the only words repeated are "a" ("the") and the first-person pronoun "me."

When one first looks at Augusto's geometric grid, reminiscent of the conceptual poems of Carl Andre, it looks like a field of *m's*, very spare and minimal. Sonically, the visual refrain of *m's* creates a long

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[10] See Augusto de Campos, "Walfischesnachtgesang" [Campos 1994: 112–113]. I have written about the concrete poem itself [Perloff 2018]; but the section here on the poem has been extensively revised. There is a Brazilian version of my discussion of the text and video versions of "Moby" in [Perloff 2021].

[11] Augusto de Campos and Cid de Campos, "Canção Noturna da Baleia," at *Poetry is Risc* (MoMA, New York, 2012), Cid Campos, video, 3:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFY066KItYI&t=39s. Here first Cid and then Augusto chant the poem itself. There are a number of other versions that feature Cid and Augusto reciting or intoning the poem. The 2008 version (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaPyeiIv4VA), for example, features cellist Adriana Calcanhoto making dissonant, scratchy sounds from the upper register of her instrument — intermittent sounds that offset's the popular song rhythms. The 2008 version begins with the image of an old engraving of Jonah and the Whale, against the background of ocean waves.

murmur — the backdrop against which other sounds appear. The *m's*, as the last line, which is in English, makes clear, all refer to *Moby Dick,* Melville's infamous white whale that Ahab, the ship's captain, and his crew are hunting. "Call me moby": Augusto's refrain aligns "moby" with the "m"-word "me" and is a play on the opening sentence of Melville's great novel:

> Call me Ishmael. Some years ago — never mind how long precisely — having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating circulation.

In the novel, Ishmael (the name in the Old Testament connotes illegitimacy) is the quintessential outsider, just as Ahab, the desperate whale hunter, represents overweening pride. But in his text, extractable from the *m* grid, Augusto fuses Ahab's story with the Biblical story of Jonah and the Whale:

a brancura do branco	the whiteness of white
a negrura do negro	the blackness of black
Rodchenko Malevich	Rodchenko Malevich
o mar esquece	the seas forget
Jonas me conhece	Jonah does know me
só Ahab não soube	yet Ahab's not aware
a noite que me coube	of the night I must bear
alvorece...	dawn's light everywhere
call me moby	call me moby

The English translation here is by Augusto himself in an email of 2018; note that he translates lines 5–8 very freely so as to replicate the rhyme of the original. Augusto's poem is, in any case, an eight-line stanza that lifts out of the sea of *m's*, an enigmatic little poem with the rhyme scheme *aa(b)ccddc*, followed by the unrhyming refrain line, "call me moby." In English, "moby" rhymes with "me" in line 5 and the rhyme scheme is a little different: *abcdefffe*.

The incantatory rhythm of these short, abrupt, strongly stressed lines invokes, not Melville's narrative of the whale hunt, but the dis-

section, in the novel's forty-second chapter, of the meaning of the word *white*. In "The Whiteness of the Whale," the narrator Ishmael tries to account for his own irrational fear of the white whale, whiteness being the "visible absence of color," the "dumb blankness" signifying "the heartless void of annihilation." But in Augusto's version, the "white-ness of white" does not invoke horror so much as mystery, a mystery he finds in its relationship to its opposite, the blackness of black. Indeed, for Augusto the white/black opposition also has an aesthetic dimension: it is, for example, the relationship of two of the greatest modern artists, Rodchenko and Malevich. Rodchenko was deeply influenced by Malevich's famous *Black Square* of 1915. But he was soon to turn from the sensuous texture and "spiritualist" depth of Malevich's Suprematism to the Constructivist emphasis on the materiality of the paint itself, as in the opaque "black-on black" paintings he exhibited in Moscow in 1919, alongside five white-on-white paintings by Malevich. And soon Rodchenko abandoned "bourgeois" painting altogether for the new art of photomontage.

The question of sameness and difference thus haunts the poem. Black and white, Rodchenko and Malevich and then Jonah versus Ahab. In each case, both alternatives are necessary: Jonah the prophet, having been swallowed by a whale, understands ("*conhece*") the poet's obsession; Ahab cannot: he is the captain of the ship but a failed hunter of whales. It is the sea, meanwhile, that forgets (*"esquece"*) both the "good" and the "bad" things it has swallowed. In the same vein, unlike Ahab or Ishmael, Augusto's narrator accepts the darkness of night as his lot, all the while looking ahead to the dawn coming up. *Alvorece*: literally, *it dawns*, and further, the verb's root being *alvo*, which also means "target," white light, far from being dreaded, is here the poet's goal. The cycle of nature can — and, after all, must — be accepted in all its strangeness. Hence the abrupt shift to English and the conclusion "Call me moby." I know, the poet seems to be saying, what *whaleness feels* like.

If Augusto had put these words into a short linear poem, as I have typed it above, it would be a kind of disjunctive Symbolist lyric in the Mallarmé tradition. It is the grid of the original poem, together with its sonic possibilities that makes it resonate. The individual words, from pronouns to proper names, are given the same weight as the continuous clusters of white *m's* so that their weight is barely felt. They wash up, so to speak, and disappear again in the waves of the sea. What remains in the end is merely a highly suggestive cluster of soft consonants and open vowels: *moby*.

Conção noturna da baleia: Augusto de Campos's minimalist whale's song, written under the sign of Morgenstern, Melville, and Malevich — there are those ***m's*** again! — is a model of what Gertrude Stein, whose poetry Augusto has so brilliantly translated,[12] called "Using Everything." In poetry, Augusto reminds us, every phoneme and morpheme, every visual inscription makes a difference: there is, as is so characteristic for Augusto, no waste motion, no filler. Read aloud, his *Call Me Moby* "catches" twenty-nine words in the grid-shaped geometric sieve lowered into the water, words the poet's voice transforms into an incantatory whirlpool, culminating in the repeated but curiously unresolved command to the audience to *callmmmmmme-mmmmmmm-moby.*

Now consider what happens when Augusto, with the accompaniment of Cid, turned *"The Whale's Song"* into a "verbivocovisual" performance piece to be adapted for various venues. I myself attended a performance of *Call Me Moby* at the *Poetry Is Risk* (*Poesia è Risco*) *Festival* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2012.[13] And then again in Budapest in 2016, when Augusto and Cid performed it for the *Pannonius Festival*. At MOMA, Augusto gave the following Introduction:

> When Melville wrote his famous *Moby Dick*, he thought that whales were dumb. Today we know that they are great singers. It occurred to me to make a poem from the whale's point of view. The novel begins with the words of the survivor narrator, "Call me Ishmael." My poem reverses his words. Of course here the whale is also a metaphor for the poet but written more from Moby's side. And then we have in Malevich, the whiteness of the white painting and the black response of Rodchenko.

The whale sounds are sung by Michiko Hirayaa. They create a minimalist background noise against which we see and hear Cid Campos strumming chords on his acoustic guitar — chords that are very tonal and melodic — whereas Augusto chants the lines of the poem as a kind of voiceover for the images on the screen — images of blue ocean waves with heavy whitewater and once or twice, the white shape of what seems to be a whale popping up from the waves. Augusto's English rendition of the "song" is played off against Cid's Portuguese one in statement-response structure. Meanwhile, the ocean water on the screen gives way to the grid

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of white rectangular cubes that quickly morph into ***m****'s*. Or are they waves? Then the ***m****'*s fade out, leaving the grid of white cubes (now alternating with tiny spheres and cylinders), which are again swallowed by the ocean. And the piece culminates in the alternation of Augusto and Cid intonating "Call me Moby!"

The main song concluded, there is then a moment of silence before Augusto steps forward to chant the following passage from the Gershwin song, "It ain't necessarily so":

> Oh Jonah, he lived in a whale
> Oh Jonah, he lived in a whale
> For he made his home in
> That fish's abdómen,
> Oh Jonah, he lived in a whale.

It is Jonah, not Ishmael, who knows what it is to be *inside* the whale, and so Augusto's is truly "The Whale's Song," in all its mystery and terror. What began in 1990 as a *despoesia*, an "unpoem" — a spare, almost severe minimalist grid, whose letters spell out the words that we almost fail to make out at first glance, becomes, a decade later, a work that fuses music, film, and poetry so as to dramatize the dialectic of black and white, night and dawn, Ahab and Jonah, Ishmael and Augusto himself. There is, in Augusto's citation from *Finnegans Wake*, "a door always open. For a new era's day." Tout le reste, as he also knows, citing Mallarmé, est littérature.

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