



The following is an excerpt from an interview with Steve McCaffery which will appear in a forthcoming issue of the Vancouver journal *LINE*. Much of the discussion focuses on a group of writers who were publishing in a magazine called *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* during the late 70s/early 80s. While these writers form a very heterogeneous group, they have shared for the most part an interest in the question of reference, of reference seen not merely as an aesthetic concern, but as a political one as well. In their essay 'Repossessing the Word', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* editors Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews characterize this concern in the following way:

One major preoccupation of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* has therefore been to generate discussion on the relation of writing to politics, particularly to articulate some of the ways that writing can act to critique society. Ron Silliman's early essay, 'Disappearance of the WORD/Appearance of the World', applies the notion of commodity fetishism to conventional descriptive and narrative forms of writing: where the word—words—cease to be valued for what they are themselves but only for their properties as instrumentalities leading us to a world outside or beyond them, so that words—language—disappear, become transparent, leaving the picture of a physical world the reader can then consume as if it were a commodity. This view of the role and historical functions of literature relates closely to our analysis of the capitalist social order as a whole and of the place that alternative forms of writing and reading might occupy in its transformation.

This concern with reference led these writers to an active engagement with both the corpus of late American literary modernism (Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, John Cage, Jackson MacLow) and with a number of French theorists writing in the wake of Althusser (Jacques Derrida, Philippe Sollers, Gilles Deleuze).

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E produced fourteen issues (not including two supplements, Volumes 1 and 3) the last of which appeared as a special issue of *Open Letter* (Winter 1982). More recently, Southern Illinois University Press produced an anthology called *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. A forthcoming issue of *LINE* will also be publishing correspondence between several of these writers.

borderlines would like to thank both Steve McCaffery and Roy Miki for permission to print this excerpt.

Andrew Payne

Nothing is forgotten But the talk of how to talk

Steve McCaffery

Andrew Payne: Steve, about the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Group. I wonder if we might raise a question as to the sociology, or at least the sociality, of the production of literary (or language) works; a question of audience, of an intended political effect. I wonder if certain of these works don't evince a certain nostalgic desire for a situation beyond the sociosymbolic contract; a desire to establish themselves as what Kristeva would call a 'semi-aphonic corporality whose truth can only be found in that which is gestural or tonal?'

Steve McCaffery: I think it imperative not to institute a model exterior to the evidence of the texts themselves and what I've stressed throughout is an intense heterogeneity among the so-called *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* writers, a heterogeneity that possibly reflects the current 'Philosophy of Difference' (emerging on both sides of the Atlantic) and which Foucault announced in his introduction to Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* back in 1972.¹ Its theoretical and methodological thrust can be traced back to the pioneer deconstructions of Nietzsche and Marx (the latter of whose status as a 'deconstructionist' albeit limited and with strict reservations would nevertheless make the subject of a wonderful interview!), to the concerted demythologizing of numerous concepts to show their covert and irreducible basis in figuration.

The early works of Silliman, Andrews, Bernstein, and myself were overtly political and the Politics of the Referent issue of *Open Letter* (1977) still stands as a diverse position paper on our work and conclusions up to the middle of the seventies. The political thrust there was quite clear: towards a foregrounding of the reader-writer relationship as both a diachronic (hence changeable) relationship and as a fundamentally socio-political configuration. From this we worked by way of analogy and homology towards an exposure of fetishism and an operation within the domain of representation and reference and we attempted to return the scene of readership to the realm of semantic production. (How can we involve the reader in the making of meaning?)

In hindsight, I can admit to certain naiveties in that approach. This writing was all produced before any of us had discovered Baudrillard's seminal work *The Mirror of Production*² which challenged with an incontrovertible conviction the subliminal valorization of production and use value as a privileged positional opposition to consumption and exchange. In the light of the Baudrillardian 'proof' that use value is but a concealed species of exchange value, I would say now that the gestural 'offer' to a reader of an invitation to 'semantically produce' hints at an ideological contamination. I've also come to feel that the majesty of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* texts yield great rewards from a double reading, that firstly announces them as a political gesture within the literary text, offering this inward sited-ness as a linguistic analogy to the political, which in itself matures as a statement somehow 'across' a distance; and secondly, from a reading that indicates their status, not as forms or structures, but as operative economies. Here, the notion of expenditure, loss, the sum total of effects of a general economized nature, would emerge to relativize the more 'positive' utilitarian ordered reading.

I would deny throughout, however, the appeal to a 'semi-aphonic corporality' or of any kind of nostalgic return to a pre-socio-symbolic matrix. If any area of recent text production is susceptible to such criticism I would say it is that variant strain of sound poetry that anchors itself in performance, supports the relegated status of the written text as an inert, secondary figuration of the 'breathed instant', and which draws as its ideological defence a certain strain of 19th century vitalism that persisted through dadaism and futurism up to the early work of The Horsemen and Owen Sound.

Among *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* writers there was a common feeling that the return of 'meaning' as a post-philosophic operation within the activity of discourse to a productive rather than consumptional zone of action, entailed a political gesture of the deepest and most contemporaneous urgency; that it effected a diachronic change in the reader-writer relationship (which, as a change per se, seemed to entail a political assertion of both roles being history specific) which opened up the possibility (appealing at the time and still appealing to many) of a rehumanization of the linguistic sign.

As to your point regarding a resistance to the symbolic. At no point do I feel that this has occurred or is occurring. What is resisted is the integrated, syllogistic momentum of the sym-

AN

INTERVIEW

WITH

bolic when that momentum is reinvested into compound meaning(s). And even further, the resistance restrains at the philosophic (metaphysical) notion of an unmediated, transparent connection with 'reality' at the other side of language. This, more than anything, has been the philosophical restriction upon language for thousands of years and whose complicity with the capitalist mode of production is evident in countless philosophic texts from Plato through Descartes to Searle and Austin. So the presence of a Politics of Discourse is everywhere present in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing as a text-by-implication.

But what emerges strikingly in the work of Silliman, Bernstein and Andrews among several others is not the Politics of Discourse but politics as discourse. If there is to be a rhetorical imposition on all of this, it is to effect a political implication and not imply a political effect. As regards Kristeva's mention of truth in the citation, I would stress that the intention of contemporary writing must always be towards an utter dismantling of the notion of TRUTH as anything exterior to the signifying practice, and to suggest by this that truth is not the destination of a referential function in language, but a writing production, a writing effect per se.

To a certain extent we've already raised the problem with Cage and MacLow, of a fetishization of chance, of what we might speak of as a valorization of process, a writing understood as being without subject, memory, history... is this not, in a certain way, the same problem we encounter in Olson, or at least a particular reading of Olson, one which concentrates on, say, his objection to Milton's 'disregard' of syllabic quantity, or in his discussion of the sentence as the subordination of the individual signifying unit (word/syllable) to an abstract structuring? (This is, for instance, the general tenor of an essay that Don Byrd wrote for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E³) It seems to me that this whole question of prosody/syntax needs to be thought more carefully, that what gets referred to as hierarchization imposed by grammar, the sentence, etc. ought not to be understood as some imposition alienating the word or syllable from the univocity of its appearance in the mouth or on the page through a process of abstraction, attribution of exchange value, whatever (and here what's being appealed to is, I think, a notion of syllable as a kind of pure idiom, an indissolubility of form/content), it seems to me that what goes unrecognized in this is the internality of 'coding' to the signifying 'instant', an internality which is responsible for the heterogeneity of that 'instant', the impossibility of its ever being present to itself.

Nor could this valorization of process be distinguished from a certain strain of American transcendentalism (from Whitman, Pound, right through to say Cage or Ammons). Here, the subject is understood as attaining to an absolute integrity, an identity of body/consciousness in each of its signifying instants.

The subject of history (its dictates and its availability to the act of writing) is a complex one with Olson. There is first that obvious sense of history at work in his poems, of history as 'fact', as document, to be worked with and turned over. This gives you the strong Comteian, strong positivist strain in his work. Document, in Olson (and perhaps more so in

Pound) operates as a kind of syllable, a unit of unmediated plenitude, reconnecting with a displaced present. This is decidedly not history in the way that Gibbons, Hegel and Marx are history. Olsonian history, this documentary-syllabic history traces back to Herodotus, the most notoriously 'unreliable' of Greek historians, whose sense of history was the transcription of 'hearsay'. Olson's attraction to Herodotus is an attraction to that same mechanism that Derrida exposes in Plato: metaphysics' appeal to a double standard of writing, to the lower, debased, materialist sense of marks on a page, which (in Plato) was submitted to a metaphoristic *aufhebung* that recast it as a 'purist' writing of truth's marks in the 'soul' and 'heart'.

Herodotian history is history that aligns itself 'innocently' with speech. I would say, in

I would stress that the intention of contemporary writing must always be towards an utter dismantling of the notion of TRUTH as anything exterior to the signifying practice

fact, aligns itself identically with the syllable, as a species of Plato's metaphoric 'writing'. But history's other presence, should I say, the other history's presence, is experienced through those grammatological notions of space, gap, deferral and trace structure. And this history locates in writing's debased profile, within the graphesis of its temporality and spacing. This space is the radical other to the syllable; it constitutes history's blank side, history's mutism, and precisely because it resists any logocentric appropriation.

Olson's affinities with certain theoreticians of German Romanticism has so far gone unregarded, but the following brief passage from Frederick Von Schelegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of Language could have prefaced any anthology of projective verse:

Properly syllables, and not letters, form the basis of language. They are its living roots, or chief stem and trunk, out of which all else shoots and grows. The letters, in fact, have no existence, except as the results of a minute analysis; for many of them are difficult, if not impossible, to pronounce. Syllables, on the contrary, more or less simple, or the complex composites of more or fewer, are the primary and original data of language. For the synthetical is in every case anterior to the elements into which it admits of resolution. The letters, therefore, first arise out of the chemical decomposition of the syllables.⁵

We will trace this organicist metaphor, this appeal to aborescent analogues through Hamann, Herder, Humboldt down to Olson's 'dance of the intellect' and 'the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE/the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE'. There are rich deconstructive pickings here in this particular style of reasoning which involves, as its underlying matrix of assumption, the privileging of all anteriority as a positive value and a binding of various satellitic terms and notions to this matrix: syllable-synthesis-origin-cause = speech-breath-presence-immediate-being-as-truth; set in opposition to the compound matrix of writing: letter-analysis-posteriority-mediation-imprint-corpse-as-death.

We would not wish to deny the intense and revolutionary polyphony of *The Maximus Poems* (Olson) nor *The Cantos* (Pound). But what needs address in these great works is the radical blind spot around the issue of vocalization per se, a primary absence of rigour at the

conceptual collision of text and voice. Behind his *Essay of Projective Verse* and the letter to Elaine Feinstein⁶ is a sense of something as still being exchangeable in nature. Something is transmitted and received, and writing's 'negative' relation to outlay and death is never admitted nor received. Olson seems oblivious to writing as a fundamental trace structure in which each 'syllabic instant' must always be a breached presence. For the presence that writing institutes is always a presence that announces an irreducible absence within the very system of the sign. This is the crux of representation and its current historical obliteration, that whenever a term (X) stands for (or represents) another term (Y), then neither term can be present. X is always standing for something else and so is never there, whilst Y, in being stood for, is always delayed, postponed and deferred from being there. After *Of Grammatology*⁷ (of which the above is an absurdly simplistic reduction) this irreducibility of the space, the gap, the breach, assumes a far more fundamental status than any pure idiom of the syllable.

STEVE

McCAFFERY

By Andrew Payne

as plurality will haunt, repeat and delete simultaneously the numerous eschatographies that inhabit and (at this historic moment) describe the act of writing as thanatopraxis. Against the post-modern valorization of pro-

The deepest implication in Freud, and the one which Lacan has best elucidated, is the radically textual nature of the psyche. We both inhabit and inhibit an unconscious that is structured as a language

To return to your earlier remark regarding a fetishization of chance, perhaps we can say that here the subject would master the other, master chance, by its very availability to contingency ('For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you', etc.). Hence, an ideology of openness, a failure to recognize the internality of death to the economy of production. I would want to hesitate then, before conceding to any simple characterization of narrative as surplus investment. (This refers to a remark made elsewhere in conversation.) In a way, yes. But then what else?

You've spoken elsewhere of two of your own works: **Panopticon** and **An Effect of Cellophane** as reinvestigations of both the sentence and of narrative. You've also made the comparison with Philippe Sollers whose novels Kristeva refers to as 'a listening to the time of Christianity'. I wonder if we are not still dealing with an Augustinian subject, a subject of 'memory'/subject of 'science' bifurcation... something analogous I think to the Freudian distinction between 'truth-work' and 'knowledge language'. So the subject of 'memory' (I who I am insofar as I have accomplished heterogeneity... I who am my Father in me, my true self) this impossible subject, this subject as eschatological object, at once organizes the order of the symbolic, of science, and at the same time produces it as an incessant rupturing. This subject, which is about a relation to Death, to Law, this subject is still in a way a subject of 'castration', of 'aufgehoben'... surplus investment?... maybe... let us say a necessary coextensivity of desire and its repression. Which is perhaps what Lyotard is getting at when he says 'the death instinct is the reason why machines can only work by fits and starts' and 'the "Ah, not to have been born"... is not merely admissible, it is a necessary component of desire...' or Kenneth Burke, more succinctly, in his misquotation of Keats: 'Beauty is turd, turd Beauty'.

The deepest implication in Freud, and the one which Lacan has best elucidated, is the radically textual nature of the psyche. We both inhabit and inhibit an unconscious that is structured as a language. This projected emergence of a post-Freudian 'textual' subject seems to be of critical importance. It puts the very notion of a 'subject' in doubt and, at best, poses that subject on the ruined concept of a Self. The latter being no longer tenable as a unitary whole, nor even as a memory/science bifurcation, I think we best look for a viable notion of subject in something like Kristeva's notion of a subject-in-process within an instinctual and symbolic economy. Part bound, part articulated by a verbal order (the self of the proper name, the name of the Father in the Son) and yet incessantly striated and (as you aptly put it) ruptured by instinctual drives that surge through the linguistic order and are felt in (but never identified as) rhythm, intonation, this Subject

cess it would offer the notion of a *complete dispensibility of procedures*. The subject in process is not to be identified then with the text as process. In the death of Modernism via Olson there has been a murder denied.

And to finally revert this to the sexual. Let us remember that the high priest of the syllable makes no mention of the woman in *The Maximus Poems*:

Being of language? It even calls on me to represent it. 'I' continually makes itself over again, reposit itself as a displaced, symbolic witness of the shattering where every entity was dissolved. 'I' returns then and enunciates this intrinsic twisting where it split into at least four of us, all challenged by it. 'I' pronounces it, and so 'I' posits myself—'I' socializes myself.

Kristeva

With the subject set in process (jouissance, death) we have lost the traditional sense of Self but gained a Text. And Text is a body.

Let me end this with a final quotation from Kristeva:

Remember Artaud's text where the black, mortal violence of the 'feminine' is simultaneously exalted and stigmatized, compared to despotism as well as to slavery, in a vertigo of the phallic mother—and the whole thing is dedicated to Hitler. So then, the problem is to control this resurgence of the phallic presence; to abolish it at first, to pierce through the paternal wall of the superego and afterwards, to re-emerge still uneasy, split apart, asymmetrical, overwhelmed with a desire to know, but a desire to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written...

The other that will guide you and itself through this dissolution is a rhythm, music, and within language, a text. But what is the connection that holds you both together? Counter-desire, the negative of desire, inside-out desire, capable of questioning (or provoking) its own infinite quest. Romantic, filial, adolescent, exclusive, blind and Oedipal: it is all that, but for others. It returns to where you are, both of you, disappointed, irritated, ambitious, in love with history, critical, on the edge and even in the midst of its own identity crisis.⁸

References

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Helen Lane, Mark Seem (New York: Viking Press, 1977).
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).
3. Don Byrd, 'Reading Charles Olson', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1984), p. 255.
4. Jacques Derrida, 'Living on Borderlines', trans. James Hulbert in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), p. 145-46.
5. Frederick von Schlegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Language*, trans. A.J.W. Morrison (London: Henry Bohn, 1847), p. 461.
6. Charles Olson, 'Letter to Elaine Feinstein', in *Human Universe and other Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
7. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976).
8. Julia Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylog' in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

A Selected Bibliography

Anthologies and Collected Critical Presentations

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1984

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Volume Four, ed. Andrews and Bernstein, published in Canada as *Open Letter 5*, No. 1 1981

The Politics of the Referent, ed. Steve McCaffery, *Open Letter 3*, No. 7, Summer 1977

LEGEND by Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, New York, 1980

Charles Bernstein

Shade, Sun & Moon Press, College Park, Md 1978

Poetic Justice, Pod Books, Baltimore, Md 1979

Disfrutes, Potes and Poets Press, Needham, Mass 1981

Sense of Responsibility, Tuumba, San Francisco 1979

Controlling Interests, Roof Books, New York 1980

Islets/Irritations, Jordan Davies Books, NY 1983

Resistance, Awede Press, Windsor, Vermont 1983

Clark Coolidge

Space, Harper & Row, NY 1970

The Maintains, This Press, Berkeley, Calif 1974

Polaroid, Big Sky, Berkeley 1975

Quartz Hearts, This Books 1978

Smithsonian Depositions & Subject to a Film, Vehicle Editions, NY 1980

Own Face, Angel Hair Books, Lenox, Mass 1978

Mine: The One that Enters the Stories, The Figures, Berkeley 1982

Ron Silliman

Crow, Ithaca House, NY 1971

Ketjak, This, Berkeley 1978

Tjanting, The Figures, Berkeley 1981

Jackson MacLow

Stanzas for Iris Lezak, Something Else Press, Barton, Vt 1971

Four Trains, Burning Deck, Providence, RI 1974

The Pronouns, Station Hill Press, NY 1979

Phone, Printed Editions, NY 1979

Asymmetries 1-260, Printed Editions, NY 1980

John Cage

Empty Words, Wesleyan University Press 1979

Themes & Variations, Station Hill, NY 1982

Bruce Andrews

Praxis, Tuumba 1978

Film Noir, Burning Deck, Providence, RI 1978

Sonnets (Memento Mori), This 1980

Wobbling, Roof, NY 1981

Andrew Payne is a Toronto poet and critic. He's a member of the borderlines collective, works at Impulse magazine, and studies and teaches at York University.