

Filling the Void in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry

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Abstract: Postmodern American poetry is known for its experimental upsurge and radical practices. There are plenty of schools that emerged with the zeal of unconventionality during the twentieth century, namely Beat Generation, Black Mountain School of Poetry, New York School of Poetry, Language School of poetry known as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School. The common factor shared by all these groups was of avant-garde and experimentality. One of the chief characteristics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is that it is writerly text (what Barthes says about text) and believes in the reader's participation in producing the poem. The Language reader is expected to be as active and conscious as the poet. He must be having the genius to use the semantic wisely as Language poetry tends to be fragmented and completed, and it is the reader's task to create the meaning out of it by completing the poem. Throughout the meaning-making process, there are several points where the reader feels miserable and disheartened as it is tricky to decode the material given by the Language poet. But the process must go on as the Language poetry is meant to be interpreted by the reader only. The present paper discusses the role of the reader in Language poetry with the example by some of the Language poets and the dilemma he has to face while decoding the poetry.

Key Words: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Language Poetry, Reader-response theory, meaning-making, Charles Bernstein.

One of the significant practitioners of Language poetry, Charles Bernstein, published a selected poetry collection entitled *All The Whiskey in Heaven* in 2010. In the volume, he published a poem called "This Poem Intentionally Left Blank" (245). As Language poets believe their text to be Writerly and thus in the reader's equal participation in the production of the poem, the said poem or one can say the Blank poem offers several opportunities to the reader to fill in the blank with his utopian thoughts. The reader can have the freedom of experimenting according to his instinct and also take the liberty to manipulate the material. Unlike other poetry, here, the reader has to use his intellect not only to interpret the poem but to create and complete the poem firstly. Since its emergence, Language poetry has maintained its attitude to play with readers' intellectual. This attitude has made it vague, mysterious and abstruse. Language poetry has managed to take Avant-garde to the extreme level in postmodern American poetry single-handedly. Language poets' primary motive seems to furnish poetry with whatever material, i.e. thoughts are available at the moment. They ignite the situation and leave it to the reader to conclude it.

Serving the purpose of Reader-Response theory and writerly text, Language poetry follow the principle that any text can be completed (or meaningful) only after the reader reads it. The creation of meaning is not on the poet's part, but it belongs to the reader. Although it is also debatable, as Joseph Harris proposes in his article, that in contemporary critical thought, the role of the reader as a meaning-maker has been quite concerned. It is highly disputable whether meaning belongs to the text or reader. It lies in the intertext or in the reference brought after reading the text. (158) If one supposes of meaning arouses from the reader's mind rather than the text, 'the pleasure of text' proposed by Barthes is actually in the mind of the reader. A text of pleasure, according to Barthes, is one which "contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it is linked to a comfortable practice of reading" (PT 14). It is also essential to know what is text and how Barthes defines reader;

"Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is tane place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. Which is why it is derisory to condemn the new writing in the name of" a humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader's rights." (DTA 148)

According to Barthes, an ideal reader reads a text without any bias presumption. When a piece of poetry is put in front of the reader, he tries to get through the text with whatever he feels in his first instinct. As mentioned above, the text tends to be an amalgamation of various cultures and practices; the question arises, would the reader be able to

participate in the production of the poem that contains foreign methods unknown to him? And even if he is, would the production or the interpretation be considered acceptable or trustworthy? Language poetry poses such questions more often than others and challenges the poetic process that has been practising since the time.

Coming back to “This Poem Intentionally Left Blank.” The poet has literally given the freedom at its peak to the reader to do whatever task pleases him to fulfil the void in the poem. The reader can write a simple alphabet as several examples are available in Language poetry where poets have put down random letters from the alphabet on the page and have declared it a poem. Or the reader can go for blogging about what he did throughout the course of the day, from getting up from the bed with immense trouble to a hard time searching for sleep at night, and still, it can be a poem. Pouring out about the frustration one is feeling either with the toxic relationship or an ill-paid job is also an option. He can opt for the doodling one can find in the poetry of Susan Howe and Robert Grenier – two of the language poets with notable popularity. Drawing a picture, no matter with a pencil, a sketchpen, a crayon, or whatever available, would also be mindful and acceptable. Or he can leave the poem untouched the way left by the poet and simply stare at the void he feels inside. The feeling would be considered as poetry. That feeling of emptiness is also a language, according to Language poets. But the question is, would the reader undertake a task to find that language he can identify with the blank paper? Would he be able to find the intention of the poet behind leaving the poem blank? Would he ever know whether the author of the poem wants the reader to fulfil the void and take the authorship of the work, or he just wants the reader to experience the language of emptiness?

Bernstein is one of the celebrated and highly respected poets of the Language School of poetry. His crafts are notably diverse from his fellow Language practitioners. His texts inscribe, as Edmond observes, the dichotomy between aesthetic and ideological readings of contemporary literature and culture. (165) Reading the poetry of Bernstein is not an easy task for readers, as he always entangles multiple aspects into his verses. He seems to lock his poetry with such aspects and has also provided a sort of key to go through it;

“To read my poetry as ironized is to read-only halfway into it. It is to stop short of the requisite further step, which is to overcome one's timidity in the face of an apparent irony and take the risk that the phrase, line, sentence, piece has more than irony to offer; the reader is called on to feel this experience through, and this is deliberate: the convictions we arrive at in triumphing over misgiving are the only ones that will last. What use is it for me to be there holding the reader's hand, telling her what to believe, or disbelieve?” (Difficulties 34)

Among all Language poets, Bernstein has given the maximum freedom to his readers to complete the task of participating in the poetry production and take the authorship. He himself has experimented with a variety of language forms. These Language forms, as he describes in *The Difficulties* issue on himself, have many possibilities as building blocks, but he is not concerned with grammar and sentences as correct in the sense that society requires compliance with codes of behaviors. And to do this, he stretches grammar but includes standard grammatical forms/ genres as a touchstone. (46) This is the reason perhaps why Bernstein's reader has to be conscious and affluent with semantics. The language he uses could be taken as a substance of writing and thought-process. There is a glaring similarity between language and thought. He displays the similarity in one of his essays published in *Content's Dream* (63) that language could not be separated from society because it is the means of society's well-being. In the same way, the process of thinking could also not be divorced from society. One can experience the world through his thought process, and through it, the world forms a meaning. He also believes that the process of learning a language is the gateway to get to know and see the world. Talking about language and thinking, he proposes, “I want to establish the material, stuff of writing, in order, in turn, to base a discussion of writing on the medium rather than on preconceived literary ideas of subject matter form. And I want to propose 'thinking' as a concept that can help to materially ground that discussion” (63). Bernstein's works bestow the crafts radical to the conventional poetry. They insist on, Sussman observes, “discontinuity as a compositional principle” and thus smoothly drift apart from “the linear thrusts of conventional prose” (1201). Bernstein manipulates words and changes the structures to alter all the possibilities in which a word can fit in its semantic or syntactic frame.

There is a proliferation of experimental works in postmodern American poetry, and Language poetry tops the list among them. It withstands the traditional concept of content and form. It fabricates a maze of all the material necessary to produce the poetry and invites readers to experience the strangulation. It does this, marks Reinfled, by making it impossible for readers to disregard the proposed materials, the structures, and the contextuality of writing. (15) Readers are approaching Language poetry not to seek pleasure or enjoyment of reading it but out of curiosity to know what Language poetry has been doing and what sort of absurdity it is providing. They feel distressed to see their familiar words in an unfamiliar context. As Reinfled comments that when readers encounter their own language represented to them as something strange phenomena, it creates a feeling of anguish in them. (17) Language poets make their text indeterminate and thus make their text vulnerable to what Marjorie Perloff called “Poetics of Indeterminacy.” Reinfled argues (21) the indeterminacy of the text and its utility by commenting that the purpose of reading such text is

“to enable, to envision, to demystify”. The adversity of such sort of text is that it is highly indecisive whether one is right in his reading or not. How so many times the reader goes through it, it always gives the feeling that something has leftover or amiss; “a remnant, a reminder, it sticks, it cannot be articulated” (21).

To decode the Language poetry, the reader needs to be equipped with savvy and by no means should be carried away by emotions. As a theory-centred type of poetry, Chaitas comments, “Language poetry is said to replace emotion with intellect. The charge of intellectualism goes hand in hand with the allegation of exclusivity since the scope of Language poetry’s audience is assumed to be willfully restricted to a coterie of informed (read: intellectual) insiders.” (317) Critics, for this reason, blame Language poetry for a specific class, and the inference further opens up several opportunities to interpret Language poetry in a Marxist context. Language poets consider their language as material. When they display any of their poetry to the reader, they expect their reader to avail the lacking material to make the task meaningful. This expectation can only be attained if there is a proper connection between the poet and the reader. Benjamin Friedlander talks about what role communication play in Language poetry in his famous article “A Short History of Language Poetry” that “communication has consistently been one of the major problems for poetics of the material text. Indirect in Coolidge, direct and even crude in Silliman, divided into message and structure in Watten, posed as a matter of epistemology by Hejinian, clumsy and failing in Bernstein, communication is always there - at least as a problem. Even in the absence of communication, the idea obstinately persists.” (122) So to say, to fill the void, first the reader must understand where is the void that the poet has kept, whether it is intentional or unintentional.

Not only Bernstein, but there are several Language poets who provide the vacuum to the readers and invite them first to fill the text and then to feel the text. Being a self-interpretive device, there are no references or clues given by the poet in any form to make the task easier for the readers. Thus, language poetry gives a chance not only to the poet but also to the reader to experiment with the language. Twentieth-century American poetry is known for its highly radical and unconventional style, and each school of poetry has its unique method to experiment. Language poets are experimental, and Izenberg gives the reason behind it that “they treat their poems not as semantic tokens or aesthetic objects but as examples, and it is the curious nature of an example that while there must be enough of them to warrant an inference, in no single one of them is it self-evident what the example is an example of.” (135) By citing Bernstein, Izenberg notes that Language poets have made dramatic claims for their “experimental” and “oppositional” poems as contributions to social justice and the reader’s freedom. At the same time, Language poetry has understood itself to be *itself* a social enterprise—a “provisional institution” that grounds “an alternative system of valuation.” (133)

In Language poetry, readers don’t have to fill the blank void always. Sometimes they have to find the blank between the words and use appropriate semantics to get any meaning out of it. Take a look at the following poem by Clark Coolidge (79) published in his poetry collection entitled *Space*;

are lamers two sew	meet unbridge lacquer
repack	ever lace map
dart foam some	two sand
belfry	pile O
hike crate	sung
bun	core slow niece
is as or fun	plow creed pucker
mice	zeals
cale tame blunt out	two same hint stole
played	origami ice neighbor
fars	may ratchet
guard lap twos leap snack	halves does
play tows	parade
me rack	match clove
miss	adobe
a coral	market toad ace
nab	are lift

At first glance, the visual of the poem makes one’s mind think of it as a pair of words and sentences one has to mix and match. Language poets are not much strict about reading their poetry from the beginning only. The reader can have the liberty to start reading from the middle, from the end, and he can even read upside down or right to left. They don’t force their readers to consider a particular word as a noun, a verb, or an adjective. Any word can be used in any sense as per the convenience of the reader. ‘A coral’ in the above-mentioned poem, for example, can be taken as a noun and be linked with ‘meet unbridge lacquer’ and be read as ‘a coral meets unbridge lacquer’. The reader is also free to

put any adjective to decorate the sentence. 'Belfry' can go with 'may ratchet' where ratchet is likely to be taken as a verb. 'Cale' and 'tame' can be reversed and fit into a semantic sentence with some foreign words' addition as 'tame cale blunt out on a pile of two sand'. Forming a question is also allowed as one can be curious about 'does halve play tows?' There are endless possibilities in which the reader can fill in the void of the poem; in words, sentences, grammars, frames, structures. The following example from the same collection (119) by Coolidge gives imaginative freedom to the reader to fill the void in the half-given word;

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Professor Suman Chakroborty in his article (20) has tried to figure out such example by the Language poets and has commented that to get the sense of 'poetry' from the piece given by the poet, a reader has to fill the void in the word with the appropriate prefix. But the problem that the reader faces is his uncertainty whether the word he has made with his ideal prefix is apt for poetic meaning. He is unsure of the probability to which his creative word can find a match with the poet's 'imagined' but 'not given' word. After all, the reader is a new author as per the belief of Language poets; he can fulfil his desire to give meaning to the fragmented particles of an-arrived poetry. A plethora of locution can come to aid as such;

Omber, Barber, Rubber, Glibber, Hobnobber, Subscriber, Stockjobber, Jibber-Jabber ...
Testing, Investing, Suggesting, Harvesting, Obtesting, Decongesting, Manifesting ...
Principle, Disciple, Participle, Mansciple, Condisciple, Undesciple, Past-Participle ...
Mature, Puncture, Aperture, Sculpture, Enrapture, Caricature, Nomenclature ...
Vent, Agent, Ardent, Nascent, Erumpent, Ebullient, Opalescent, Pulverulent ...
Amative, Sorptive, Emanative, Combustive, Nuncupative, Exhilarative, Curative ...
A fracture, A vulture, A prelature, A quadrature, A forfeiture, A vasculature ...
The zing, The swing, The dying, The lapwing, The pudding, The rain-king ...
Lotion, Auction, Sedation, Coronation, Dissertation, Indignation, Hyperinvolution ...

The reader can take any word, decide the function of the word, sew it into the sentence, embroidery it with necessary semantics, and the poem is ready to wear. The only doubt that causes misery is whether it is called poetry. And if it is, then who is the one to decide it and what designation he holds to declare it. If producing poetry is that easy, then what importance Shelly's quote: "Poets are unacknowledged Legislature of the world" carries? Language poets, in the race of becoming radical and different from the trend, have become extreme. The sense of poetic identity seems to be lost in order to go unconventional and experimental. Timothy Yu notes in her article (433) that "Language writers are willing to disrupt notions voice, self, and content in their poems, they reserve the right to step back into identity, into the realm of political, individual speech." She continues that "the movement from which Language poetry emerges, as well as the way the language of minority discourse creeps into Bernstein's later work suggests that the anxiety of engagement Language poets feel may be brought on by the presence of a powerful example: the rhetoric politics of ethnic identity."

Extremity happens when Language poets try to give repetitive stuff to their readers and want them to come out with new meanings every single time. The following example from Silliman's *Tjanting* would justify the inference; "Of about under to within which what without. Elbows' flesh tells age. Hands writing. Blender on the end-table next to the fridge. Out of rock piled groupies. Hyphenate. Smoke cigar, sip water. Mineral. This was again beginning. Beginning questions. Seams one sees. Monopoly, polo pony. Blue patches breaking clouds up in the later afternoon. Non senses. It was not beginning I began again." (AT 135-136)
"Of about under to within which of what without into by. A taut bend to the palm tree to indicate wind. Flesh at the elbow goes slack as one grows older, gathers in folds. Fireworks replay the war. By the fridge on an end-table a blender. A fly's path maps the air of the room, banging at the win dows. Hand writings. Recent words have been struck. Groupies pile out of rock. An accidental order is not chance." (AT 138)

Robert Grenier, whose declaration “I HATE SPEECH” became one of the founding characteristics of Language poetry, has as well trust in his readers participating in the production of the poem. He is among those extreme Language poets who, in the name of serving the pure language, give minimal materials. Look at the example below (published in *The Difficulties*, Charles Bernstein Issue) where he has given the only preposition by anticipating his readers to fill the void with the rest of the words.

To To
to to to to
to to to to
to to to to (Twelve poems 75)

The equal sign in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E proposes the equality of all the thoughts and references in the given text. The farthest reference from the reader regarding the text is equally important as the most obvious reference. This sign carries a spark inside, and to get that energy transferred from the poet to the reader, the reader has to be accountable. It is the reader’s responsibility to read beyond the sentences and between the words. He has to decode and interpret the “system of sign” (Chakraborty 18), and by doing it, whether forcefully or spontaneously, he can reach the state of poetry inside by the poet.

Language poetry is the school where readers have to be more conscious than the author. Writing nonsense, fragmented and schizophrenic patches are the hallmark of Language poetry. It is the readers’ task to mend the fragmentation and make the patch meaningful. The language poets remind us, but in a new way, what several poets and critics have tried to teach us: that there are forms of language that cannot be understood entirely under the rubric of subjectivity. Naturally, those who are of a contrary opinion will still try to explain the material text in personalizing terms, such as psychology or biography. Such explanations often have some validity, but they are never entirely satisfactory. (Friedlander 136) Although language writing is challenging to digest as poetry, if the reader puts aside all the prejudices of form, content, and language regarding the poetry, it will be fun to experiment with turning into poetry whatever has been served. Being an avant-garde genre, Language poetry tends to suffer but to penetrate the avant-garde text; the reader has to think avant-garde. The beneficial part of the avant-garde poetry so as of Language poetry is, it never projects any particular meaning; thus, the reader can utilize his utmost liberty to make the given poetry meaningful by filling the void wherever required.

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