POSTMODERN AMERICAN POETRY

A NORTON ANTHOLOGY

Second Edition

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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
New York • London

Introduction

What Is Postmodern Poetry?

The poet Charles Olson used the word "postmodern" as early as an October 20, 1951, letter to Robert Creeley from Black Mountain, North Carolina. Doubting the value of historical relics when compared with the process of living, Olson states: "And had we not, ourselves (I mean postmodern man), better just leave such things behind us—and not so much trash of discourse, & gods?"[1] As used in this anthology, "postmodern" covers the historical period following World War II, and refers to avant-garde poetry by American poets from 1950 to the present. Broadly speaking, the term suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the sentimentality and self-expressiveness of its life in writing. Arising from within the economic context of postwar consumer society marked by the overwhelming influence of large corporations, the philosophical context of existentialism, and the technological context of ever-more-powerful mass communications, the period contains several markers: 1975, the end of the Vietnam War; 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union; and September 11, 2001, whose tragic events are coincident with the expansion of global capitalism. Over the decades covered in this anthology, the term "postmodern" has received acceptance in all areas of culture and the arts; it has even come to be considered a reigning style, one that continues in the twenty-first century.

Despite such enormous changes and turbulent events, culturally the situation is much the same as 1991, when critic Frederic Jameson wrote, "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think about the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first

1. *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, Vol. 8, Santa Rosa, 1987, p. 79.

place."[2] The postmodern view reacts not to history as much as to cultural and aesthetic production, preferring the image to the object, the copy to the original, the maximal to the minimal, surface to depth. Its style has been described as "quotationist," "citationist," and "double-coded."[3] Messy rather than neat, plural rather than singular, mannered and oblique rather than straightforward, it prefers the complications of the everyday and the found to the simplicities of the heroic. Its tongue is seriously in its cheek. It is all styles rather than one.

Jameson has argued that postmodernism represents a break with nineteenth-century romanticism and early twentieth-century modernism. In his words, postmodernism is characterized by "aesthetic populism," "the deconstruction of expression," "the waning of affect," "the end of the bourgeois ego," and "the imitation of dead styles" through the use of pastiche.[4] In Jameson's opinion, postmodernism is the perfect expression of late capitalist culture as dominated by multinational corporations. If Jameson is correct, "deconstruction of expression" is symptomatic of the loss of individuality in a consumer society and, under the 2002 Homeland Security Act, stronger limits on privacy and individual rights. As history finds its "end" in liberal democracy and consumerism, it loses its sense of struggle and discovery. This results in the affectless or "blank" style of some of today's conceptual poets, as well as language poetry's preference for Gertrude Stein's "continuous present." Similarly, Jameson's "aesthetic populism" would reflect the triumph of mass-media communication over the written word. In this new edition, there are several "authorless" texts. Kenneth Goldsmith's "Seven American Deaths and Disasters" contains not one word of his own expression; it consists of transcripts of police tapes and mass communications reports. The text is mediated and edited but, strictly speaking, it is not authored. Such an approach presents a challenge to authorship's treasured concept of originality.

Others argue that postmodernism is an extension of romanticism and modernism, both of which still thrive. Thus what Jameson calls pastiche, a patchwork of styles, is simply a further development of modernist collage—today's cultural pluralism can be identified in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pound's *The Cantos*, and Picasso's Cubist appropriation of the ceremonial masks of Benin; the self-reflexiveness of postmodern art can be found in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and as far back as *Tristram Shandy*; performance poetry is simply the most recent of many attempts, including those of Wordsworth and William Carlos Williams, to renew poetry through the vernacular. The poetry of John Ashbery is quintessentially postmodern, yet it is influenced by the modernist

2. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC, 1991, p. ix. 3. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, NC, 1987, p. 285. 4. *New Left Review*, No. 146, July/August 1984, pp. 53–92.

romantic Wallace Stevens and the modernist Augustan W. H. Auden. John Cage's use of the "prepared piano" and his emphasis on indeterminacy in language represent high postmodernism, yet they can also be situated, along with the Aeolian harp, a stringed instrument on which the wind played, in the history of romanticism. The contemporary emphasis on machine poetics, constructivism, proceduralism, the death of subjectivity, and found material can be traced to Dada and aesthetic materialism of the early Soviet period. To further confuse the picture, some poetic practices that appear to work against expression, like the Dada cut-up poem and Google sculpting, resemble ancient divinatory practices. For example, the West African practice of Ifa divination depends on the casting of sixteen cowrie shells. How the shells fall directs the *babalawo*, or priest, to recite one of 256 poems of the Ifa canon, which then serves as the supplicant's cure. The cyberpoet takes samples from the great online stream of digital consciousness; the resulting poem will bear the evidence of our cultural and psychic condition. Acts of chance in divination and art are often highly methodical. John Cage *prepared* his piano for dissonance by hampering certain strings.

In the first edition of this anthology, we chose "postmodern" for the title over "experimental," "avant-garde," and "millennial" because it is the most encompassing term for the variety of new practices since World War II, ranging from the oral poetics of Beat and performance poetries to the more "writerly" work of the New York School and language poetry. Now it is called upon to encompass the further developments of the postlanguage lyric, conceptual poetry, cyberpoetics, and proceduralism. These new poetics tend to work in opposition to the motives of mid-twentieth-century romanticism, which served as the dominant model from 1950 to 1990. While language poetry has been the major influence and theoretical model since 1990, newer directions are divided between the postlanguage lyric, which seeks the expressive, and conceptual, cybernetic, and procedural poetics, which work against writing as expression. Once feared for desiring to run lyric poetry out of the canon, language poetry has provided Barbara Guest, Ann Lauterbach, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Andrew Joron, among many other solitary singers, with fresh resources. Nevertheless, the poetics standoff remains the division between the ghost (the human figure, myth, and song) and the machine (structure, method, and wit). Both styles are postmodern. One might even speak of early and late postmodernisms. The early consists of Beat, projectivist, New York School, deep image, and aleatory poetics (Cage and Mac Low), while late postmodernism represents a digital and media-conscious shift to cybernetic and machine poetics.

The concept of the postmodern has come under criticism, but no other term has arisen that seems adequate to describe the cultural condition since World War II. The scholar John Frow casts it into past tense in "What Was Postmod-

ernism?," but in the end points out the difficulty of dispensing with the word "postmodern" and, by implication, what it represents: "The very persistence of the word, however irritating this may be, seems to indicate that something is at stake, something that cannot be brushed aside as a theoretical fashion."[5] More importantly, the philosophical foundations of the postmodern are existential rather than metaphysical and derive from the philosophers of crisis, identified by one commentator as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida.[6] Gregory Bruce Smith writes, "Nietzsche meant that it would no longer be possible for man to believe in anything that transcends the immanent, temporal world, that the bases of the values that had previously shielded humanity were destroyed once and for all. . . . Eternity was driven out completely, and therewith Being, to be replaced by the unrelenting reign of Becoming."[7] Eternity is reduced to Ethernity, the cybernetic universe that can be shared by all, much of which is mundane and profane. It is not that postmodernism lacks foundations, as some have suggested, but rather that the foundations have shifted from the transcendent to the everyday; from surrealism's search for the absolute to the emphasis in Dada on found materials, performance art, and conceptualism; from the necessary and natural to the arbitrary, contingent, and manmade. Instead of playing in the fields of the Lord, the poet plays with the material substance of the language. Heidegger wrote of his approach to philosophy, "I have left an earlier standpoint, not in order to exchange it for another one, but because even the former standpoint was merely a way-station along a way. The lasting element in thinking is the way. And ways of thinking hold within them that mysterious quality that we can walk them forward and backward, and that indeed only the way back will lead us forward."[8] Being on the way (*unterwegs*) is a principle factor of postmodern, process-driven writing, from Olson, Ginsberg, and Ashbery to the language poets. Instead of succumbing to history, postmodernism remains stubbornly underway by appropriating and refashioning established practices. The way forward is the way back to Jarry, Tzara, Duchamp, and Stein.

According to critic Peter Bürger, avant-garde art opposes the bourgeois model of consciousness by attempting to close the gap between art and life. However, "an art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it."[9] Vanguardism thus collaborates with nineteenth-century aestheticism in the diminishment of art's social function even as it attempts to advance it. The risk is that the avant-garde will become

5. *Time & Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1997, p. 23. 6. Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*, Berkeley, CA, 1987. 7. *Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Transition to Postmodernity*, Chicago, 1996, p. 71. 8. "Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer," trans. Peter D. Hertz, *On the Way to Language*, San Francisco, p. 12. 9. *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 50.

an institution with its own self-protective rituals, powerless to trace or affect the curve of history. When the first edition of this anthology appeared, the newest development was language poetry, a Marxist-feminist poetics that, despite its opposition to the romantic and insistence on the word as such, shared in many of the cultural assumptions of the Beats, such as resistance to commodity culture. The more recent schools of thought may seem comparatively post-historical in approach. They may even appear to revel in aspects of American culture and mass media that Charles Olson called "pejorocracy." In fact, following the situationists, many of today's conceptual and cyberpoets turn violence and mass-media manipulation back on itself by holding the mirror of its own language up to it.

This anthology hopes to assert that avant-garde poetry endures in its resistance to dominant and received modes of poetry; it is the avant-garde that renews poetry as a whole through new, but initially shocking, artistic strategies. The "normal" way of writing in any period was first the practice of the innovators of previous generations. In the introduction to the first edition of this book, we suggested, "By this reasoning, recent postmodern aesthetics like performance poetry and language poetry will influence mainstream practice in the coming decades." This has proved to be an understatement. The leading language poets hold endowed chairs at leading universities, and their practice has become so historicized that, since the turn of the millennium, critics have referred to a "postlanguage" generation. With the rise of creative writing graduate programs and the increasing professionalization of what academics call "the discipline," even the outsiders and vanguardists find teaching positions available. Born in 1969, the conceptual poet Craig Dworkin is professor of English at the University of Utah, where he edits a conceptual poetry website, *eclipse*. The covers of his books are proudly displayed on the English department website. The majority of the books are academic studies on conceptual poetry, about which he is a brilliant commentator. There is nothing in this very successful profile to slander Craig Dworkin; quite to the contrary. The point is that, on many fronts, the old oppositions of town and gown, bohemian and academic, have broken down. Apparently nobody in the English department demands that Craig Dworkin alter his poetics to serve the greater aesthetic or moral good, or commence upon a sonnet sequence. In the history of such relations, this is a relatively new development. One of the leading practitioners of the cyberpoetry mode called Flarf, K. Silem Mohammad, did indeed write a sonnet sequence, which he calls sonnagrams, based on anagrams of the lines of Shakespeare's lines. Because such a procedure requires the use of an online anagram generator, the resulting translations can be trifling or profane. It's up to the poet as editor to make the best of the procedure to which she or he has committed. As the new movements of their day, Dada, surrealism, modernism, and the Beats were considered silly and/or transgressive. This is true also

of today's new movements. It is only with time and close consideration that the necessity of these works emerges, beyond what at first seems their ludic arbitrariness. The issue today is not the survival of avant-garde, but rather the astonishing speed with which it triumphs.

Postmodernism is not a single style with its departure in Pound's *Cantos* and its arrival in language poetry; it is, rather, an ongoing resistance to and comment upon dominant practices. William Carlos Williams railed against the sonnet, Ezra Pound against pentameter; today's conceptual poets Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin question creativity itself. With each new development, we recognize that the language game of poetry is continually in play. No matter how sharp the break with a former tradition, new methods and means of attending to the poem result in a "having said." Someone who stands before us as priest has cast the cowrie shells once more.

In the 1960s, in opposition to the impersonal, Augustan poetry encouraged by the New Criticism, the postmodern revolt was primarily in the direction of a personal, oral, and "organic" poetry that saw each voice as unique. Frank O'Hara's injunction, "You just go on your nerve,"[10] called for an improvisatory poetics of the everyday that was essentially neoromantic. Yet, in its intense casualness, his poetry also argued against the romantic concept of self; in its disregard for the metaphysical, it broke with the "transcendental signified." By the late 1970s, a new generation of postmodernists had begun to challenge the speech and breath-based poetics of Olson and Ginsberg. Nevertheless, most innovators since 1945 have valued writing-as-process over writing-as-product. They have elevated the pluralistic, which Charles Olson called "the real biz of reality," over the singular, which Olson called "the whole ugly birth of the 'either-or.'"[11] Postmodernism decenters authority and encourages a "panoptic" or many-sided point of view. It prefers "empty words" to the "transcendental signified," the actual to the metaphysical. In general, it follows a constructivist rather than an expressionist theory of composition. Its "I" is often another. Method vies with intuition in driving poetic composition. With the death of God and the unfortunate but inevitable distancing of nature, appropriation becomes a reigning device. Our books become our civilization and our nature; at the same time, the words are just words. Having no conclusion to come to, narrative doubles back on itself with overlapping and sometimes contradictory versions. For example, Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) consists of the first ten chapters of ten novels, none of which is developed or concluded. To begin again and again is to create the "continuous present" that Gertrude Stein called for as the "now and then now" of writing. What

10. "Personism: A Manifesto," in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*," New York, 1972, p. 498.
11. Letter to Robert Creeley, October 20, 1951, in *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, Vol. 8, p. 73.

a text means has more to do with how it was written than what it expresses. As Robert Creeley wrote, "Meaning is not importantly *referential*."[12] Quoting Charles Olson, Creeley continues, "*That which exists through itself is what is called the meaning.*"[13] Like Williams's plums, "so sweet / and so cold," the thing is valued for itself, not for its symbolism. In general, postmodern poetry opposes the centrist values of unity, significance, linearity, expressiveness, and any heroic portrayal of the bourgeois self and its concerns. The poetry in this volume employs a wide variety of strategies, from the declaratory writings of the Beats to the more theoretical work of the language poets. The empty sign, like the use of transgressive material by the Beats and Flarf, is but one means of resistance to any settled definition of poetry. However, for many poets in this anthology, of both the pre- and postlanguage lyric, signs are far from empty and require no grieving. The empty sign, like Hölderlin's weather vane clattering in cold weather, may actually be the one that's too full.

The Battle of the Anthologies

In analyzing American poetry after 1945, it is traditional to point to the so-called battle of the anthologies that occurred with the publication of *New Poets of England and America* (1962), edited by Donald Hall and Robert Pack, and *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960* (1960), edited by Donald Allen. The former put forth a literature that was more traditional, formal, and refined. Its contributors were schooled in the assumptions of the New Criticism, which held that poems are sonorous, well-made objects to be judged independently of the author's experiences; they speak to and from their place in the ongoing tradition of sonorous, well-made objects. Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), universally assigned in poetry literature classes, placed emphasis on the poem's craftsmanship, uses of paradox, thematic and formal weights and balances, and self-consistency. To use Robert Lowell's terminology, borrowed from Claude Levi-Strauss, the poetry of the Hall/Pack anthology was more "cooked" than "uncooked." Trusting in tradition, its contributors were not eager to reject the influence of British letters in favor of a home-grown idiom. Yeats was preferred to Williams, the mythical to the personal, the rational to the irrational, the historical to the living moment, and decorum and restraint to spontaneity. However, the early confessional poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were included, perhaps an indication that New Criticism's demand for objectivity and critical distance was already under question. Rob-

12. Introduction to *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, New York, 1966, p. 9. 13. The same.

ert Pack's introduction to his selection of American poets under forty (Hall selected the British poets) shows his distaste for spontaneous poetry:

> The idea of a raw, unaffected, or spontaneous poetry misleads the reader as to what is expected of him. It encourages laziness and passivity. He too can be spontaneous, just sit back and respond. A good poem, rather, is one that deepens upon familiarity. . . . It is not enough to let a poem echo through your being, to play mystical chords upon your soul. The poem must be understood and felt in its details; it asks for attention before transport.[14]

Pack sides here with the formalism of the New Criticism, which required consistency of structure and poetic detail. Positioning himself against the romanticism of Beat poetry, he stresses "attention" (the close-reading style of New Criticism) and "familiarity" (tradition). He implies that the only worthwhile poems are those that lend themselves to study. The overall defensiveness of the remark suggests that the new poetry had already begun to make its mark.

In 1955, five years before the publication of the Donald Allen anthology, the San Francisco Renaissance burst on the scene with a single momentous reading at Six Gallery, 3119 Fillmore Street. Jack Kerouac described the event in *The Dharma Bums*:

> Anyway I followed the whole gang of howling poets to the reading that night, which was, among other important things, the night of the birth of the San Francisco Renaissance. Everyone was there. It was a mad night. And I was the one who got things jumping by going around collecting dimes and quarters from the rather stiff audience standing around the gallery and coming back with three huge gallon jugs of California burgundy and getting them all piffed so that by eleven o'clock when Alvah Goldbrook [Allen Ginsberg] was reading his, wailing his poem "Wail" drunk with arms outspread everybody was yelling "Go! Go! Go!" (like a jam session) . . . .[15]

In fact, as poet and critic Michael Davidson points out, there had been earlier activity in San Francisco. As early as 1944, Robert Duncan had begun to set the stage for a publicly gay role in literature by publishing his essay "The Homosexual in Society." In 1949, Jack Spicer wrote, "We must become singers, become entertainers," a prophecy of the Beat movement's return of poetry to its bardic roots.[16] Since the 1920s, Kenneth Rexroth had been a

14. *New Poets of England and America*, Cleveland, 1962, p. 178. 15. New York, 1958, p. 13
16. "The Poet and Poetry—a Symposium," *One Night Stand and Other Poems*, San Francisco, 1980, p. 92.

significant avant-garde figure in the Bay area, organizing "at homes" for writers and artists and reading poetry to jazz long before the Beat poets made the activity popular. The Six Gallery reading galvanized media interest in a variety of alternative poetries. It also introduced the concept of poetry as public performance.

If Robert Pack's model poet "deepens upon familiarity," Donald Allen's deepens upon strangeness, preferring the irrational and improvised to the decorous and well made. In the tradition of Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, the poets in Allen's anthology also emphasized the American idiom and place. Although predominantly male, many of these poets were Jewish, Irish, Italian, black, and gay—that is, from "new" ethnic and social groups. They lived primarily in New York City and San Francisco, where they were influenced by other arts, especially jazz and painting. None of them taught at a university; the distinction between bohemia and academia was clear in 1960. The radicalism that inspired many poets of the 1960s has found expression in critical approaches such as feminism and multiculturalism that are central to the study of liberal arts.

The most public of the new poetries was the Beat movement led by Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the fiction writers Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. The word "beat," suggesting exhaustion, beatitude, and the jazz improvisation that inspired many of its writers, was first used by Jack Kerouac, who also provided the titles for Ginsberg's *Howl* and Paul Carroll's notable literary magazine *Big Table*. Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), written on a continuous roll of teletype paper, provided the Beat model of composition, which Kerouac also dubbed "spontaneous bop prosody." "Not 'selectivity' of expression," Kerouac insisted, "but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thoughts."[17] In Ginsberg's *Howl*, this verbal improvisation and jazz sense of measure can be heard in lines such as "ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind." According to Ginsberg, Kerouac believed that "the gesture he made in language was his mortal gesture, and therefore unchangeable."[18] It could no more be revised than the act of walking across a room. Spontaneous composition is not, however, without discipline. "What this kind of writing proposes," Ginsberg once said, "is an absolute, almost Zen-like, complete absorption, *attention* to your own consciousness . . . so that the attention does not waver while writing, and doesn't feed back on itself and become self-conscious."[19] With its roots in the poetry of Blake, Whitman, and William Carlos Williams, Beat writing is public, direct, performative, ecstatic, oral, and incantatory. It is both irreverent and spiritually aware. Ginsberg's

17. "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," *The Moderns*, ed. LeRoi Jones, New York, 1963, p. 343.
18. *Allen Verbatim*, ed. Gordon Ball, New York, 1974, p. 145. 19. The same, p. 147

line, "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night," searches for meaning high and low. Ginsberg experimented with drugs, was expelled from Columbia University for writing an obscenity on the window of his dorm room, and spent time in the psychiatric ward of Rockland State Hospital. At a time that demanded form, decorum, refinement, and impersonality, his poetry was vivid, profane, loud, and personal. The "secret hero" of *Howl* is Neal Cassady, also immortalized as Dean Moriarty of *On the Road*, who lived the exuberant and ultimately self-destructive life the bohemian tradition so much admires. In 1968, Cassady died in Mexico at age forty-one from a lethal mixture of alcohol and sleeping pills; Kerouac died the following year. The Beat influence has been sustained by each new generation's attraction to its mythologies of youth and visionary ambition. Beat poetry remains the ideal of art made with all the immediacy of life. It is Blake's figure of the powerful youth, Orc, rising up in verbal flames, as opposed to the exhausted Urizen (your reason), crawling on his hands and knees.

Central figures of the New York School, which emerged parallel to the Beat movement, are John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, and Barbara Guest. Ashbery, O'Hara, and Koch attended Harvard; all the men but Koch were gay; and all five figures lived in Manhattan. Strongly influenced by the French avant-garde, especially the novels of the eccentric amateur Raymond Roussel, they founded the magazines *Locus Solus* and *Art and Literature* and set upon the most self-consciously nonprogrammatic poetics of the period. However, something of a general stance can be found in O'Hara's essay "Personism: A Manifesto," written as a parody of Charles Olson's "Projective Verse." O'Hara states that one day in 1959, while writing a poem for a specific person, he realized that he could "use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born."[20] Personist poetry speaks with immediacy and directness of everyday experience, in everyday language. O'Hara's statement, "You just go on your nerve," is reminiscent of the spontaneity and antiformalism of the Beats; his insistence that Personism "does not have to do with personality or intimacy"[21] suggests that the self for O'Hara was objectified, a being among other beings. Much of the work of James Schuyler has the intimacy and easeful charm of Personism; it is also among the most lyrical of the group. But the Personist mode is not characteristic of all New York School poetry and is only part of O'Hara's production. Although formally radical in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), John Ashbery also loves traditional but minor forms like the sestina, pantoum, and haibun. Likewise, Kenneth Koch wrote his comic epics *Ko* and *The Duplications* in ottava rima, the stanza of Byron's *Don Juan*. Like Byron, Koch and the rest of the New York School poets admire

20. O'Hara, p. 499. 21. The same.

wit, daring, urbanity, and offhanded elegance. As courtly eccentrics, they set a tone that is distinct from the more earnest bohemianism of the Beats. The New York School has a fondness for parody (Koch's "Variations on a Theme of William Carlos Williams") and pop culture (Ashbery's Popeye sestina, "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape"). It also works within the avant-garde tradition of the "poet among the painters." As a curator for the Museum of Modern Art and organizer of major exhibits, Frank O'Hara was the Apollinaire of New York painting in the late fifties and early sixties. John Ashbery was editor of *ARTnews*, and James Schuyler and Barbara Guest were frequent contributors to art journals such as *Art in America*.

It is important to note the leading role of John Ashbery in American poetry since the publication of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). Perhaps because his poetry expresses the period's most important theme, indeterminacy, Ashbery has become a major poet in an age suspicious of the term. Indeterminacy means the conditionality of truth, as well as a compositional tendency away from finality and closure; the text is in a state of unrest or undecidability. Characterized by sudden shifts in tone and a wide range of reference, making frequent use of the self-canceling statement, Ashbery's poetry has the capacity, to quote Frank O'Hara, for "marrying the whole world."[22] Through circuitousness and obliqueness, Ashbery alludes to things in the process of avoiding them; in saying nothing, he says everything. In the words of David Lehman, "Ashbery's poetry points toward a new mimesis, with consciousness itself as the model."[23] Mimesis refers to representation in art—for example, the ability of a painter to make an apple look like an apple. Ashbery paints a picture of the mind at work rather than the objects of its attention. He has remarked, "Most reckless things are beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing."[24]

While O'Hara and Schuyler can be grouped as Personist and intimist—the New York School quotidian—much of the poetry of John Ashbery and Barbara Guest falls into the category of the "abstract lyric." Guest is especially adept at this philosophical mode, as can be seen in the majestic "Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights." The abstract lyric can also be located in the work of Ann Lauterbach, Marjorie Welish, and, to some degree, Michael Palmer. Because her thinking tends to be about perception itself, the work of the language poet Lyn Hejinian sometimes seems related to the abstract lyric mode. Abstract lyric rarely seeks to solve a philosophical issue; rather, it follows the path of indeterminacy. But we are usually provided with symbolic figures in the discourse. In Ann Lauterbach's "Platonic Subject," for instance:

22. "Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's," *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, New York, 1972, p. 266.
23. "The Shield of a Greeting," in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. David Lehman, Ithaca, 1980, p. 118. 24. "The Invisible Avant-Garde," in *Avant-Garde Art*, eds. Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery, London, 1968, p. 184.

But here is a twig in the form of a wishbone.
Aroused, I take it, and leave its outline
scarred in snow which the sun will later heal:
form of the real melts back into the ideal
and I have a twig.[25]

In the late sixties a second generation of New York School poets, including Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Alice Notley, Anne Waldman, and Bernadette Mayer, came into their strength. Through readings at St. Mark's Church on the Lower East Side and through journals such as *The World*, *Telephone*, and C, they brought a more bohemian tone to the New York School "dailiness" and wit. As the presiding figure of the scene, Ted Berrigan influenced a large number of younger poets, including the youngest poet in this volume, Ben Lerner, whose "Doppler Elegies" share with Berrigan's *The Sonnets* (1964) a shifting, cut-up, combinatory sense of the line. A classic of the period, *The Sonnets* applied the cut-up method of Dada poet Tristan Tzara to the sonnet form. Because the same phrases and lines would intermittently reappear, Berrigan seemed also to be taking the lines out of a hat.[26] With Ron Padgett and Joe Brainard, he wrote the notable volume *Bean Spasms* (1967). Other significant books produced by this generation were Padgett's *Great Balls of Fire* (1969) and Alice Notley's *How Spring Comes* (1981). Anne Waldman, with her extraordinary skills as a poet, performer, and organizer, provided much of the energy that made the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church and later Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, powerful literary centers.

Projectivist or Black Mountain poetry evolved under the leadership of Charles Olson at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The leading alternative college of its time, Black Mountain was home to an extraordinary number of major figures, including painters Josef Albers and Robert Rauschenberg, composers John Cage and Stefan Wolpe, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, and futurist thinker Buckminster Fuller, creator of the geodesic dome. The poets Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, Denise Levertov, and Robert Duncan were in residence. Black Mountain poetics, which is more programmatic than that of the Beats or New York School, depends primarily on the essays and teachings of Charles Olson, especially "Projective Verse" (1950), where he calls for an "open" poetry in which "FIELD COMPOSITION" replaces the "closed form" of the past. Field composition means that the poet "puts himself in the open," improvising line by line, syllable by syllable, rather than using an "inherited line" such as iambic pentameter.[27] Olson quotes the young Robert Creeley as saying that "Form is never more than an extension of content."[28] Form and content are therefore inextricably linked. Quoting his mentor Edward Dahlberg, Olson writes, "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception."[29] To this he adds the injunction that "always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER."[30] This compositional pressure includes close attention to the syllable, which is "king."

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE[31]

Attention to the line as a unit of breath is a major principle of Black Mountain composition, though, as a technique, it was flexible rather than prescribed. Each breath is a unit or measure of utterance; this is reflected in the length of the line, and, with Creeley's work especially, how the line is broken. Recordings of Olson and Creeley, whose speech patterns are quite different, reveal the importance of the line and breath to their spoken words. A similar emphasis is found in Ginsberg's statements that each strophe of *Howl* is ideally a unit of "Hebraic-Melvillean bardic breath."[32] The relation of speech and breath to the poem is organic and thereby urgent and necessary. Speech and breath are sanctified and relate to proprioception, the body's knowledge of itself.

Another important aspect of Olson's essay is his concept of ego: "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego . . . that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature . . . and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects."[33] Olson's goal was to avoid the self-congratulatory mode, with its inevitable drift toward pathos. This is not to say that Projectivist poetry is necessarily impersonal. Olson's "The Librarian," among other poems, deals with his own life; the same is true of work by Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Robert Duncan. The monumental figure of Olson as a man (he was six feet eight inches in height) is reflected in the figure of Maximus in *The Maximus Poems* (1960).

Influenced by Zen Buddhism and Dada, the poetry of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low reflects an interest in the use of aleatory, or chance, procedures;

25. *Before Recollection*, Princeton, NJ, 1987, p. 28. 26. In "To Make a Dadaist Poem," Tristan Tzara wrote: "Take a newspaper. / Take some scissors. / Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem. / Cut out the article. / Next carefully cut out each of the words that make up the article and put them all in a bag. / Shake gently. / Next take out each cutting one after the other. Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag. The poem will resemble you. / And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd." *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, translated by Barbara Wright, Kalamazoo, MI, 1981/1992, p. 39.

27. *Charles Olson: Selected Writings*, New York, 1966, p. 16. 28. The same. 29. The same, p. 17. 30. The same. 31. The same, p. 19. 32. "Notes for Howl and Other Poems," in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, eds. Donald M. Allen and Warren Tallman, New York, 1973, p. 318. 33. "Projective Verse," p. 24.

Mac Low was also among the first to practice digital poetics. Cage's *Themes & Variations* (1982) depends on a "library of mesostics in one hundred and ten different subjects and fifteen different names to make a chance-determined renga-like mix."[34] Cage used *I Ching* operations to focus his project, as well as to link a notebook of ideas with the names of friends. The purpose was "to find a way of writing which though coming from ideas is not about them; or is not about ideas but produces them."[35] By employing mesostics, a form of acrostic in which emphasized letters spell out words vertically at the center of horizontal lines of poetry, Cage attempts to free the language from syntax. This "demilitarizes" it. "Nonsense and silence, so familiar to lovers, are produced. We actually begin to live together," he writes in the foreword to *M: Writings '67–'72*."[36] In his preface to *The Pronouns*, Jackson Mac Low explains that the series of poems involved a "set of 3-by-4-inch filing cards on which there are groups of words and of action phrases around which dancers build spontaneous improvisations."[37] Due to a "correspondence of format to syntax, each verse line, *including its indented continuation*, if any, is to be read as one breath unit."[38] Thus the series of poems not only stands as script for the dance, but also provides its own instructions for oral performance.

Aleatory poetry was not widely practiced initially by the generations of avant-gardists to follow Cage and Mac Low. Yet its emphasis on the indeterminate and accidental, its reliance on rigid structures and methods to achieve randomization, its use of appropriation and found materials, and its willingness to lend itself equally to performance and the poetics of language poetry, make it the essence of postmodernism. Cage's work also bridges the earlier European avant-garde, especially Dada, and more recent American developments such as conceptual art, Flarf, cyberpoetry, and the procedural aspects of Newlipo.

In the first postwar generation, only a few women, such as Denise Levertov, Diane Di Prima, and Barbara Guest, rose to prominence within the avant-garde. However, the 1970s saw the arrival of a number of significant women poets, from Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer, and Alice Notley among the New York School to Susan Howe, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Rosmarie Waldrop, Rae Armantrout, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, and Carla Harryman, among others, associated with language poetry and related innovation. Implicit in the language poets' break with traditional modes such as narrative, with its emphasis on linearity and closure, is a challenge to the male-dominant hierarchy. In her essay, "The Rejection of Closure," Lyn Hejinian quotes Elaine Marks regarding the desire of French feminist writers to "use language as a passageway, and the only one, to the unconscious, to that which had been repressed and which

34. John Cage, *Introduction to Themes & Variations*, Barrytown, NY, 1982, p. 8. 35. The same, p. 6. 36. Middletown, CT, 1973, p. 2. 37. Barrytown, NY, 1979, p. viii. 38. The same, p. ix.

would, if allowed to rise, disrupt the symbolic order, which Jacques Lacan has dubbed 'the Law of the Father.'"[39] At the same time, Hejinian sees the limit of complete openness: "The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would be in fact a closed text. It would be insufferable."[40] Wanda Coleman's "Brute Strength" refers to sexual conflict directly, using narrative elements to intensify the drama of the poem. Because it is more forceful rhetorically, the poem may seem more political than the work of women language poets. Yet the comparatively oblique work of Leslie Scalapino frequently alludes to the intrusive power of the male gaze and sexualized public space.

By 1990, two relatively marginal influences of the seventies, language poetry and performance poetry, had become increasingly significant as postmodern modes. The first emphasized textuality, therefore a degree of intellectual difficulty. Strongly based in theory, it required an initiated reader. In its complexity and literariness, language poetry was reminiscent of the high modernism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Yet language poetry was Marxist and feminist in theory and disdained Pound and Eliot for their politically conservative themes. Performance poetry, especially as it evolved into poetry "slams," had its chief appeal with the popular audience of noninitiates. Its commitment was not to the "poem as poem," but rather in using the words as script for spoken word performance. In its verbal intensity, it recalled the Beat coffeehouse readings of the 1950s. Among the poets here represented, Anne Waldman, Wanda Coleman, Christian Bök, and Edwin Torres have the largest commitment to performance.

Language poetry found its disparate precursors in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914); the writings of Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, a creator of *zaum*, or "transrational language"; Louis Zukofsky's "A" (1959/1978) and the Objectivist movement in general; John Ashbery's most radical book, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962); the early work of Clark Coolidge such as *Space* (1970); and the methodical procedures of Jackson Mac Low. Some aspects of Black Mountain poetics, especially Olson's statement against the individual ego, were also of interest to language poets, though they disassociated themselves from what Charles Bernstein called the "phallocentric syntax" of Olson's poetry.[41] Seeing a poem as an intellectual and sonic construction rather than a necessary expression of the human soul, language poetry raises technique to a position of privilege. Language poets see lyricism in poetry not as a means of expressing emotion but rather in its original context as the musical use of words. Rather than employ language as a transparent window onto experience, the language poet prizes the material nature of words. Because it

39. *Writing/Talks*, ed. Bob Perelman, Carbondale, IL, 1985, p. 282. 40. The same, p. 285. 41. "Undone Business," in *Content's Dream: Essays, 1975–1984*, Los Angeles, 1986, p. 329.

is fragmentary and discontinuous, language poetry may at first appear to be automatic writing; however, it is often heavily reworked to achieve the proper relation of materials. This approach is consistent with William Carlos Williams's definition of a poem as a "small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant."[42]

However, the principle of sheer volume often found in language poetry tends to frustrate the economy of phrase, and its suggestion of organic form, inherent in Williams's model. Ron Silliman's *Tjanting* (1981) consists of 213 pages of prose poetry, the last paragraph of which starts on page 128. It begins, "What makes this the last paragraph?" The sprawl of such work is designed perhaps to communicate the democratic principle of inclusiveness. Its form is located in what Silliman calls "The New Sentence," sentences being "the minimum complete utterance" according to linguist Simeon Potter.[43] Favoring the prose poem for its formal freedom and exhaustiveness, Silliman builds up a mosaic structure by means of seemingly unrelated sentences and sentence fragments. This progression of non sequiturs frustrates the reader's expectation for linear development at the same time it opens a more complete world of reference. The emphasis in language poetry is placed on production rather than packaging (beginning, middle, and end) and ease of consumption. Gertrude Stein gave the credit for this egalitarian theory of composition to her favorite painter: "Cézanne conceived of the idea that in composition one thing is as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole."[44]

The author cedes his or her false authority as individual ego; broadly distributing wealth in the form of words, the author acquires a more trustworthy authority. Because the words are so freely given, they may seem scattered and disorganized. It is therefore necessary for the reader to participate actively in the creation of meaning. Charles Bernstein states in his essay "Writing and Method":

> The text calls upon the reader to be actively involved in the process of constituting its meaning. . . . The text formally involves the process of response/interpretation and in so doing makes the reader aware of herself or himself as a producer as well as consumer of meaning.[45]

A poem is not "about" something, a paraphrasable narrative, symbolic nexus, or theme; rather, it is the actuality of words. In the case of *Tjanting*, formal

42. Author's introduction to *The Wedge* (1944), in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, Vol. 2, New York, 1988, p. 54. 43. *Modern Linguistics*, New York, 1964, p. 104. 44. "A Transatlantic Interview 1946," in *A Primer for the Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert B. Haas, Santa Barbara, 1976, p. 15. 45. *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984*, Los Angeles, 1986, p. 233.

interest is added through the use of the Fibonacci number sequence in determining the number of each paragraph's sentence count, as well as Silliman's astute musical sense of words.

Language poetry's resistance to closure, which infuses meaning throughout the poem rather than knotting it into lyrical and dramatic epiphanies, may prove to be one of its most lasting effects. It has also revealed the limits of a "natural" or "organic" concept of poetry. In language poetry, as in Marshall McLuhan's theory of television, the medium is the message. Words are not transparent vessels for containing and conveying higher truth; they are instead the material of which it is shaped. Gertrude Stein said that she was interested in two aspects of composition:

> . . . the idea of portraiture and the idea of the recreation of the word. I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense.[46]

In much the same way an artist might view paint and stone, Stein conceived of words as the plastic material of her compositions in language. Each word has its own "weight and volume." It exists from an artistic viewpoint for its own "recreation." Such a view disinvests the language of metaphysics and returns it to the physical realm of daily use. Like Stein, language poets shatter the assumption that poetry is necessary and deep; it is, instead, arbitrary and contingent. Language poetry, too, rejects the idea of poetry as an oral form; it is written. To use Roland Barthes's terminology, it is more "writerly" than "readerly." Indeed, language poetry could be seen as fulfilling Barthes's prophecy of a "neutral" mode of writing:

> . . . writing thus passed through all the stages of progressive solidification; it was first the object of a gaze, (Châteaubriand) then of creative action, finally of murder, (Mallarmé) and has reached in our time a last metamorphosis, absence: in those neutral modes of writing, called here "the zero degree" of writing; we can easily discern a negative momentum . . . as if literature, having tended for a hundred years now to transmute its surface into a form with no antecedents, could no longer find purity anywhere but in the absence of all signs . . .[47]

46. "A Transatlantic Interview 1946," p. 18. 47. *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York, 1967, p. 5.

Early workers in what is now called language poetry—Jackson Mac Low, Clark Coolidge, and Michael Palmer—remain as important precursors. However, much of the critical theory and organizational energy have been the work of Charles Bernstein, whose numerous books of essays including *A Poetics* (1992) and *My Way* (1999) most effectively express the group's thinking. Among other important points, Bernstein rejects reading as an "absorption" into the text, wherein the reader is captured by mimesis. Like many other postmodern theorists, he also opposes the heroic stance, which "translates into a will to dominate language rather than let it be heard."[48] Early in the movement's development, theoretical energies were divided, like Rap, into East Coast (Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews) and West Coast (Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman) schools and resulted in its own battle of anthologies: Douglas Messerli's *"Language" Poetries* (1987) and Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* (1986). Also of note was *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, edited by Michael Palmer (1983); Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax* (1985); Lyn Hejinian's *The Language of Inquiry* (2000); Steve McCaffery's *North of Intention* (2000); and Joan Retallack's *The Poethical Wager* (2003). Particularly significant to the early development of language poetry was *Writing/Talks* (1985), edited by Bob Perelman, a collection of talks given at the San Francisco gallery New Langton Arts in the late seventies and early eighties.

As language poetry began to sweep the field of poetics and became acceptable in English departments at leading universities, an important question was raised, that of the lyric poem. Any thought of a "language lyric" seemed impossible. Too many statements had been made against the bourgeois ego and transcendental signifier. However, there remained the option of depicting personal experience through the intermittency of the "new sentence." Each section of Lyn Hejinian's prose poem sequence *My Life* (1987) contained thirty-eight sentences, one for each year of her age. The scenes are brief but cumulative and also imply a fondness for one's own history. The same could be said of Ron Silliman's works in *Tjanting* (1981) and *Paradise* (1985). The sentences and fragments are brief and well modulated but resist narrative development. Nevertheless, it is recognizably Ron Silliman gazing at the thumb he sliced while carving roast beef. In short, though language poetry may bring the personal to bear, it rarely lends it the lyrical note of Keats's "silence and slow time." We find that lyrical note in the poetry of James Schuyler, Denise Levertov, and others of the first postmodern generation. But the survival of the lyric into the postlanguage period was largely due to the "abstract lyric" practiced by John Ashbery and Barbara Guest. Philosophical and often playful, this meditative mode is influenced by Wallace Stevens and, perhaps to some degree, in Ashbery and Laura Riding. But it was with Barbara Guest's

48. Undone Business," p. 329.

Fair Realism (1989) that the innovative lyric began its negotiation with language poetry. This engagement of language and lyric, often expressed through the fragment and Mallarmé's silence of the white page, would have a profound influence on the practice of young poets in the late nineties and into the new millennium.[49] The call back to Mallarmé, like conceptual poetry's dependence on Marcel Duchamp and the found object, is part of the avant-garde paradox. We often take a step back in art history to take a step forward.

Leading poets of the postlanguage lyric include Peter Gizzi, Elizabeth Willis, Cole Swensen, Mark McMorris, Rae Armantrout, Fanny Howe, and Elizabeth Robinson, among others of diverse practice. Postlanguage lyric cannot be said to constitute a school but rather the natural inclination of poetry toward sweetness and depth of expression; moreover, subjectivity, while often tempered with irony, is granted a role. Peter Gizzi's "A Panic That Can Still Come Upon Me" begins, "If today and today I am calling aloud / / If I break into pieces of glitter on asphalt / bits of sun, the din." The poem announces itself as a cry or plea, which is always done at emotional risk. Usually identified as a language poet, Rae Armantrout seems increasingly a poet of personal expression, as her recent works such as *Versed* (2009) are touched with self-elegy. The poetry of Fanny Howe sometimes deals directly with religious faith. Neither Armantrout nor Howe has substantially altered her style, but what they write has found a wider audience.

Postlanguage poetry also involves the emergence of three distinct schools of poetry: Newlipo, conceptual poetry, and cyberpoetry, which includes the popular practice of Flarf. Influenced by Dada, Situationism, and Oulipo, they find common ground in their love for cyberspace, the appropriation and manipulation of found texts, a delight in poetry machines, methods, and procedures, and the ironic use, as well as *détournement*, of mass media.

Newlipo adopts the practices of the French group Oulipo, or *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature). Founded on November 24, 1960, by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, Oulipo consisted primarily of mathematicians and scientists who met for dinner and the discussion of new or "potential" forms of writing. Among such forms is the lipogram, which excludes one or more letters of the alphabet from the work being produced. Oulipo stalwart Georges Perec wrote a novel, *La disparition* (1969) that famously contained no letter "e." The leading poet of Newlipo is Christian Bök, whose best-selling poetry book *Eunoia* (2001) consists primar-

49. Mallarmé wrote in "Crisis in Poetry" (1895): "There will be none of the sublime incoherence found in the page-settings of the romantics, none of the artificial unity that used to be based on the square measurements of the book. Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alternations and relationships—all this contributing to the rhythmic totality, which will be the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way." In *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems Essays & Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook, Baltimore, 1956, p. 41.

ily of five prose poem sequences that, each in turn, uses only the vowels, "a," "e," "i," "o," and "u." His poem "Vowels," on the other hand, excludes all letters of the alphabet but those in the poem's title. Harryette Mullen made a sensation with her volume *Muse & Drudge* (1995), which employs the practice of homophonic translation to comment upon the cultural history and place of African Americans in U.S. society. In the work's opening stanza, "Sapphire's lyre styles / plucked eyebrows / bow lips and legs / whose lives are lonely too," Sapphire, the radio and television wife of Kingfish on the 1950s *Amos 'n' Andy Show*, is doubled with the Greek lyric poet Sappho. In *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002), Mullen adopts other Oulipo forms, such as N+7, which requires replacing all nouns of a preexisting work with the seventh noun to follow in whatever dictionary you possess.

Like Newlipo, twenty-first-century conceptual poetry draws upon an earlier international experimental movement. Beginning in 1956, the Brazilian *Noigrandes* group consisting of Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari stirred international interest in their "poesia concreta" (concrete poetry), which they defined as "[the] tension of thing-words in space-time."[50] Creating verbal objects, they sought the materiality of the word as word, rather than as a vehicle for the transcendent. Such materializing of the word brought poetry closer to conceptual art and has influenced conceptual poetry in the United States. The American poet Aram Saroyan was creating conceptual poetry when he wrote the one-word work "lighght" in the 1960s[51] Ron Padgett's *Great Balls of Fire* (1969) is rich in conceptual poetry; for instance, his sonnet, "Nothing in That Drawer" repeats the title fourteen times. Of the postwar avant-garde, the New York School, with which Padgett is associated, has been most attracted to Oulipo practices.

A rich new phase of conceptualism arrived with Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin, Robert Fitterman, and Vanessa Place. Goldsmith's *Day* (2003) consists of his word-by-word transcription of an entire issue of *The New York Times* from Friday, September 1, 2000. None of the words are his own. In appropriating the words of others, he sets forth two major principles of his practice, "hyperrealism" and "uncreative writing." The creativity of his work has nothing to do with the virtuosity and originality of his phrasing; in fact, there is none. The work's creative value begins and ends with its concept. We may also admire the writer's labor as the craftsman (that is, typist) of the work. Just as few read all of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, most people will not want to read the exhaustive result. A sample of the work suffices to authenticate its existence. Imagine the difference in the work's impact if the day selected

50. "From (Command) Line to (Iconic) Constellation.," UbuWeb, Kenneth Goldsmith. http://www.ubu.com/papers/goldsmith_command.html. 51. *Complete Minimal Poems*, Brooklyn, 2007, p. 31.

had been September 11, 2001. Would the result be too inherently dramatic to qualify as "unoriginal writing"?

Today's conceptual poet goes farther than Charles Olson's proscription of "the lyrical interference of the individual as ego." In conceptual works there may be no lyric, no author, no expression, and no act of original writing, unless the cutting and pasting of others' words is to be considered writing. Conceptual poetry defines itself as, "Unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management, word processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as its ethos."[52] Nevertheless conceptual works can be beautifully conceived and structured. Vanessa Place's *Dies: A Sentence* (2005) is a novel in verse consisting on a single sentence. Craig Dworkin's *Parse* (2008), consists entirely of parsing of the grammatical structures of Edwin A. Abbott's *How to Parse: An Attempt to Apply the Principles of Scholarship to English Grammar*, published in 1874. A major influence on such overwriting was Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953), in which, with Willem de Kooning's permission, the little-known younger artist, age twenty-three, erased a drawing by one of the masters of abstract expressionism. The erased work of course was no longer de Kooning's but Rauschenberg's. Sherrie Levine's photographing of Walker Evans's iconic photos of the Great Depression is also an important influence.

Jason Christie offers the term "plundergraphia" to refer to the literary uses of found material: "I believe it is necessary at the outset," he writes, "to demonstrate how plundergraphia is distinct from plagiarism and reference, and shares little more than intention with found poetry. Plagiarism requires a person to desire to conceal a source for his or her benefit. . . . Found poetry appropriates previously conceived material into new arrangements but is still dependent upon the final product as a product. Plundergraphia is a more general praxis that situates words in a new context where they are changed by their transformation."[53] Christie identifies Ronald Johnson's treatment of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as having a plundergraphic attitude toward an original source: Johnson's "transformations of the original distort it beyond legibility into an entirely new creative expression."[54] Johnson creates out of Milton, who was no romantic, a prophetic tone reminiscent of William Blake. His means were both intuitive and procedural, and the result is clearly literature. In Kenneth Goldsmith's works, which are plundered from nonliterary sources, the original is not only recognizable but left virtually intact. Because readers are accustomed to the point of view of the imaginary—not what is, but what is

52. "Conceptual Poetics," Kenneth Goldsmith, Sibila online journal, http://www.sibila.com.br/index.php/sibila-english/410-conceptual-poetics/. 53. "Sampling the Culture: 4 Notes toward a Poetics of Plundergraphia and on Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*," UbuWeb Open Letter, http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg_ol_christie.html. 54. The same.

possible—they may have difficulty in identifying Goldsmith's works with literature. They are, quite simply, the actual.

Not coincidentally, boredom is a positive aspect of many conceptual and cyberpoetry works. A year of New York City weather reports (Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*, 2005) will be boring to most readers after a few pages; nevertheless, the concept remains amusing. Like the Andy Warhol movie, *Sleep* (1963), in which poet John Giorno is filmed sleeping for five hours and twenty minutes, such works use real rather than fictive time. As cyberpoet Tan Lin writes, "Change, like boredom, is the byproduct of time passing. One might add that Warhol's paintings like his novel *a: A Novel* (1968) and his films, are the byproduct of time repeating itself, and thus that thing known as desire. Warhol is the most Platonic of modern artists. He creates an endless series of simulacra of Eternal Forms. . . . Beauty can never be had; it can only be flirted with."[55] Kenneth Goldsmith quotes John Cage as saying: "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all."[56] From the perspective of real time, it's possible to view literatures of fictive time, such as the symbolist poem or romance novel, as absurdly willed into being.

As Walter Benjamin noted with regard to the work of art: "The presence of the original is prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. . . . The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility."[57] With the rise of mechanical reproduction, such as moveable type, the lithograph, and the photograph, the aura of the original began to fade, ultimately leading, in our era, to a fondness for copies and mechanical means of production. The simulacrum, or copy, began to take on its own aura. Such is the state of affairs, when, long after McLuhan, the museum gallery most trafficked is the one with a video playing. With the loss of originality as a value, nature, the art of painting, heroism, originality, and the lyric poem begin to lose their savor, replaced by a Heraclitean stream of Internet words and images. Emerson wrote "under every deep a lower deep opens." In the new media streams, there are no depths but rather an insistent rushing of the shallows.

Referring to Borges's fable in which "the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly," Baudrillard notes: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it.

55. "Warhol's Aura and the Language of Writing," *Cabinet* 4, Fall 2001, http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/4/linh.php. 56. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, New York, 2011, p. 134. 57. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York, 1955/1968, p. 220.

It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory."[58] Ultimately, "it is all of metaphysics that is lost. No more mirror or being and appearances, of the real and its concept."[59] Ultimately, the real "is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere."[60]

Cyberpoetry is defined by Brian Kim Stefans, a leading practitioner, as (1) "writing that takes advantage of the possibilities afforded by digital technologies—such as the internet, or graphics programs such as Illustrator or Photoshop, or animation/audio/interactive programs such as Flash—in their creation and presentation" or (2) "those forms of writing that are informed by new ways of thinking brought about by the way digital technology has impacted our world, i.e. forms of writing that are organized according to principles of the database, or that work primarily as texts distributed over the internet."[61] This includes recombinant poetics that can be done *without* the computer, such as William S. Burroughs's "cut-up" fictions, concrete poetry, and various Oulipo practices that address the language as replaceable physical matter rather than "necessary expression." Compositional tools expand to include poetry machines such as anagram and Gematria generators, as well as word randomizers like Cut'n'Mix that are created by algorithm. One of the first of these, Travesty (1984), was a simple DOS program codesigned by the scholar Hugh Kenner. Travesty allows for the input of a preestablished text, which can be randomized by letter count on a range from 1 to 9. One of Jackson Mac Low's favorite cyber tools was Diastext4, which analyzes and remixes the letters that appear in a source phrase. Cyberpoetry has also developed its own theoretical and critical vocabulary, with terms like "hacktivist," "wordtoys," "text/image complex," "generative text," and "database aesthetics."[62]

The primary technique of cyberpoetry is sampling; that is, the cutting and pasting of texts and/or images located on the Web onto a page where you have determined to construct a poem. Sampling begins with the use of an online search engine, into which a search phrase is entered. In many respects, cyber technique resembles collage. The field from which to sample is enormous, and it makes available material that ordinarily would fall outside poetry's range of reference. With each copy and paste comes the cultural stain of the Web. This explains the tone of Flarf, a cyberpoetry noted for the outrageousness of its content.

Brian Kim Stefans writes of his fellow cyberpoet: "Tan Lin seems to have gotten there before most of us. His first book, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* (1996), glided along on riffs and rhythms that seemed as if Gerard Manley Hopkins's "dapple-

58. *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor, 1994 (1981), p. 1. 59. The same, p. 2. 60. The same. 61. "What Is Electronic Writing?" in *Kluge: A Meditation, and Other Works*, New York, 2007, p. 121. 62. The same, pp. 122–23.

dawn-drawn Falcon" had gotten stuck in John Yau's English-as-a-Stammered-Language machine."[63] He then quotes from Lin's poem, "Talc Bull Dogface":

> Lu Hsun chews geisha cup. Geisha spits
> cup. Clouds form on back like worms
> in planetarium. How is tap-dancing
> nightingale distinguish
> from cleaning rag?[64]

Referring to the "scattershot" aspect of the writing and the "Chinaman in the clinamen," Stefans admires the "vast text dump" organized by "some hidden, reptilian algorithm" that bounds along until it glows "with a radium-like intensity."[65] The poem was probably created by an algorithmic text randomizer. However, Tan Lin's simulation of Hopkins's authorship may ultimately have felt too authored. He soon changed to the contrasting mode of "ambient literature":

> For me, the ambience is a mode of absorption. . . . I came out of this language poetry movement premised on difficulty, non-lyric, things that have not to do with memorization or the expression of a self or a voice. Ambience was, for me, a way of dealing in a sort of avant-garde or experimental context with some of these ideas, and to diffuse them, simply because I thought the aesthetic autonomy that was promulgated from within seemed, in some ways, slightly outmoded, in that, really, so much that we experience today has to do with ease of absorption, labeling[66] things.[67]

This ambience includes samplings from other poets such as Laura Riding, T. S. Eliot, and Emily Dickinson, which appear "slightly rewritten." As Tan Lin says, "I don't want there to be a shock of montage you would get in a T. S. Eliot 'Waste Land' poem; I wanted it to be effortless and float and soak over you."[68] To create a more accessible style (his friends had failed to understand his first book), Tan Lin turned to the established mode of the personal essay, the addition of fictive elements, such as an imaginary spinster aunt who lives sadly in Seattle, and uses of the everyday. In his essay, "Artifice of Absorption," Charles Bernstein had opposed a poetics of absorption and ease, calling instead for the impermeability of artifice, distraction, and difficulty, and attention scattering. However, Tan Lin's ambient literature uses the devices of artifice and distraction to absorptive, easeful, and accessible ends. Likewise, his flirtation with boredom appears to be for his own, and the reader's, amusement.

63. "Streaming Poetry," *Boston Review*, October/November 2004 archives, http://bostonreview.net/BR29.5/stefans.php. 64. The same. 65. The same. 66. *A Poetics*, Cambridge, MA, 1992, p. 29. 67. "Ambiently Breaking Reading Conventions: Colin Marshall Talks to Experimental Poet Tan Lin," *3 Quarks Daily*, July 5, 2010, http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/07/ambiently-breaking-reading-conventions-colin-marshall-talks-to-experimental-poet-tan-lin-html. 68. The same.

Much digital poetry appears in online periodicals, and many literary magazines can be found only in digital format. However, collections of digital poetry still appear primarily as printed books. In his print collections, Tan Lin imports the visual look of the Web, such as an advertisement for Blimpie's, as a reminder of the work's origins. The results can be alternately fragmentary and jittery (sampling mode) or steady and banal (ambient mode). Tan Lin writes: "What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. . . . It would be nice to create works of literature that didn't have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading."[69]

The cyberpoetry practice of Flarf was founded by Gary Sullivan in December, 2000, when, upset by his grandfather being scammed by a poetry contest, he set out to write the worst poem possible. That poem, "Mm-hmm," began with the lines:

> Mm-hmm
> Yeah, mm-hmm, it's true
> Big birds make
> Big doo! I got fire inside
> My "huppa"-chimp™5
> Gonna be agreesive, greasy aw yeah god

When Sullivan sent the poem to his friends online, they decided to write their own purposely bad poems. According to a Flarf historian, "They plugged random phrases into Google and emailed the 'poetic' results to their colleagues. That group, in turn, Googled the new lines of poetry, and massaged the results into verse—a poetic pyramid scheme. . . . The poems were so bad, they were good. A terrible beauty was born."[70] Sullivan also named the movement. "I found the word 'flarf' online on a police blotter where some stoner had described marijuana as flarfy," Sullivan said.[71]

Unlike most schools of poetry, Flarf has never issued an official statement of poetics. In this and other respects, it resembles Dada. However, Sullivan sees a more important connection to Camp: "Flarf is similar to Camp in that it

69. *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking*, Middletown, CT, 2007, p. 16. 70. Rick Snyder, "The New Pandemonium: A Brief Overview of Flarf," *Jacket* 31, October 2006, http://jacketmagazine.com/31/snyder-flarf.html. 71. The same.

sets aside any pre-existing sense of 'good' and 'bad' in favor of another value, or set of values. It does not, however, as some believe, favor 'bad' over 'good.' It simply does not make the distinction."[72] Sullivan claims that the difference between the two resides primarily in their emphasis on form and content: "There is, in much Flarf, a superabundance of content. Often to an embarrassing or discomfiting degree."[73] Like Kitsch, Camp is an art style of the early 1960s that calls for an art so bad it becomes fashionable, as in the television series *Batman*. Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* has aspects of Camp, such as Humbert Humbert's adoration of Lolita's toenails.

By May of 2001, Sullivan had created the online Flarflist, which included Nada Gordon, Drew Gardner, Kasey Mohammad, Katie Degentesh, Mitch Highfill, Jordan Davis, Carol Mirakove, and, somewhat later, Maria Damon and Erik Belgum. The poets Michael Magee, Rodney Koeneke, and Rod Smith were also involved. Flarf traffic was initially heavy online, but after a few months enthusiasm began to wane. Sullivan recalls: "By September 2001, the list became relatively silent. Not too long after 9/11, people began posting again, though now all of the flarfs—many of which were parodies of AP News items—in some way or form addressed the aftermath of 9/11 including media portrayal of the same."[74] With works like Drew Gardner's "Chicks Dig War," Flarf can take moral action through the situationist *détournement* of the disagreeable aspects of culture.[75] But on the whole, the motive of Flarf is the pure amusement of the online carnival. Like the Pac-Man video game of yore, it represents the popular culture's appetite for its own products. Such a tone can be found in K. Silem Mohammad's essay "Excessivism," a parody of Frank O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto":

> Everything is in the European blinko (whatever that means), but at the risk of sounding like the Powerline Boys on a corndog-and-Super-Squishee bender, I will write to you because I just heard that the Police are reuniting for the Grammies. Now come on, I don't believe in God, so I don't have a problem. I hate Southwest Airlines, I always have. I may be spoiled, but I like airlines that offer advance seat assignments and first class cabins for upgrades. I don't even like whales. Please, feel free to observe the irony of my current situation: I love to sleep.[76]

72. Tom Beckett, "Interview with Gary Sullivan," e-x-c-h-a-n-g-e-v-a-l-u-e-s, May 14, 2006, http://willtoexchange.blogspot.com/2006/05/interview-with-gary-sullivan.html. 73. The same. 74. "The Flarf Files," Flarf website, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html. 75. Founded by the Letterist International and extensively developed by the Situationist International, *détournement*, or "derailing," involves the spoofing of a dominant system such as commodity capitalism by turning its expressions against itself. The works of artist Barbara Kruger are a prime example. 76. *Action Yes Online Quarterly* 1.5 (Spring, 2007), http://www.actionyes.org/issue5/excess/mohammad/mohammad1.html.

Flarf enjoys the controversial but strategically advantageous position of presenting what seems to be a new low in poetry. But its daring has opened new fields of reference and recuperated a populist, content-centered writing that had been missing during the comparatively theoretical reign of language poetry. As a postlanguage poetry, Flarf stands at the opposite pole from the postlanguage lyric, which, despite its uses of irony and oblique phrasing, maintains the gravitas of the human subject. In the Mohammad quote above, it's hard to decide what or whom he is spoofing. Is it Frank O'Hara, poetry as expression, or a culture that values the Powerline Boys, the Police, and Southwest Airlines? Is our silliness and profanity a form of sleep? Or is Mohammad attempting to awaken us to the real situation? Conceptual poetry and Flarf have the means to *détourn* society, but are they too entrenched in official art culture and infantilized by popular culture? Or are poets like Ann Lauterbach, Claudia Keelan, and Bob Perelman already saying, between the lines of their lyric poems or more directly with Perelman's irony, what will restore us to sense and right action?

An interesting and sometimes dispiriting debate on the current state of poetry occurred in 2009 between conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith and *Skanky Possum* editor Dale Smith.[77] Goldsmith wrote:

> Any notion of history has been leveled by the internet. Now, it's all fodder for the remix and recreation of works of art: free-floating toolboxes and strategies unmoored from context of historicity. . . . All types of proposed linear historical trajectories have been scrambled and discredited by the tidal wave of digitality, which has crept up on us and so completely saturated our culture that we, although deeply immersed in it, have no idea what hit us. In the face of the digital, postmodernism is the quaint last gasp of modernism.

To which Smith, who supports a "slow poetry" based on the expressive intuitions of individual authors, responded:

> We're surrounded by the past in the form of digitized archives. I understand that. But Benjamin's notion of history is rooted in a sense of the catastrophic failures of history in the twentieth century, too. Paradise is a dream—a true liberating force (an impossibility?)—that is rooted in a meaningful search for images. We are surrounded by artifacts, ending fodder for remixing, as you say. But how do we proceed with this

77. "The Tortoise and the Hare: Dale Smith and Kenneth Goldsmith Parse Slow and Fast Poetries," Monday, July 6, 2009–Saturday, July 25, 2009, *Jacket* 38, Late 2009, http://jacketmagazine.com/38/iv-smith-goldsmith.shtml.

material in respect to the catastrophe? Are we really free to ignore the contexts and situations produced by these images?

While Goldsmith celebrates the digital flood, Smith goes on to remind us that "the human psyche remains at best a kind of Paleolithic thing," as Gary Snyder, the Pound-Olson tradition, and others have long understood. For all the triumphal claims of conceptualism, no one is drowned but Icarus and the ship of history sails calmly on. History determined that Rae Armantrout, an experimental lyric poet and close observer of human experience, won the Pulitzer Prize for 2010. In the weights and measures of value, the lyric mode continues its negotiation with the most primal of technologies, the human mind and voice. It does its writing both by hand and on the computer, with craft and sometimes wisdom, and in varying degrees of silence and sound. It is difficult for the Internet to conceive of silence. As the poet Cole Swensen writes, "There does exist a territory of impression not accessible by language. The exploration of such a territory seems to me the particular domain of the arts."[78] When a cybernetic poet casts a Google search phrase onto the Internet, he or she invites the furies of wisdom and foolishness to attend the poem, as Ginsberg did in the writing of *Howl*. The challenge to authorship is always made by an author, who recognizes the mysteries of the actual and allows them, for a time and within a given artistic frame and intention, to speak. There are, finally, no empty words. Despite claims made for the digital revolution, the computer remains a research, editing, and compositional tool for the great majority of poets in this volume. The limit of the person is the limit of the machine.

As we noted in the previous edition, the avant-garde, which fractures tradition, has its own traditions and long history, which critic Marjorie Perloff views as beginning with Rimbaud in the second half of the nineteenth century: "It is Rimbaud who strikes the first note of that 'undecidability' we find in Gertrude Stein, in Pound, and in Williams . . . an undecidability that has become marked in the poetry of the last decades."[79] This inheritance includes Futurism, Dada, surrealism, modernism, and the varieties of postmodernism we are now experiencing. Despite the exhaustion we may feel at the political and economic levels, with each generation poetry does renew itself. The approaches taken by the poets in this anthology are broad and various, but certain patterns and schools of thought emerge. We should not imagine that a single style rules the period, such as language poetry, conceptual poetry, or the postlanguage lyric. It is all of the above. Perloff's term "undecidability" does not mean that the poets or the era have no determination. It is poetry

78. Poet's statement, *Writing from the New Coast: Technique, o•blēk* 12, Spring/Fall, 1993, ed. Peter Gizzi and Juliana Spahr, p. 91. 79. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Evanston, 1983, p. 4.

itself that thrives on a certain uncertainty. That principle was first stated by Keats in a letter to his brothers of December 22, 1817:

> It struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.[80]

Strange to quote Keats on this subject, but his insight holds for the poetry of our time, just as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle speaks to the measurements of science, that what we know of quantum events is changed by our perception of them. Our poetics assert a position, but a truth or beauty held too tightly slips away to other arms. Cole Swensen is correct, and Kenneth Goldsmith is correct. Will Alexander is correct when he writes: "Poetry commences by the force of biographical intensity, by the force of its interior brews, by the sum of its subconscious oscillations."[81] And Gertrude Stein, who was ahead of her time, was correct when she wrote, "No one is ahead of his time."[82] As Friedrich Hölderlin, who was mad half of his life, knew too well: "The god / is near and difficult to grasp."[83] That god, charm, or source of interest is what compels you to read a novel in verse consisting of one sentence, or Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli," or Caroline Knox's "Freudian Shoes." The poem was unsolvable and a little ugly, but lovely. It has so teased your interest that a couple of days later you want to read it again.

80. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*, Cambridge Edition, Boston, 1899, p. 277. 81. "Poetry: Alchemical Anguish and Fire," Gizzi and Spahr, pp. 15–16. 82. Quoted in "Stacy Doris: Poet's Statement," Gizzi and Spahr, p. 133. 83. "Patmos," *Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, trans. Maxine Chernoff & Paul Hoover, Richmond, CA, 2008, p. 283.