

# ‘The Dwelling-Place’: Roland Barthes and the Birth of Language Poetry

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To say that the work of Roland Barthes influenced the development of the writers known broadly as the ‘language poets’ is a critical commonplace. It is not hard to see how this conclusion has been drawn: a lengthy quotation from *Writing Degree Zero* takes up the front page of the second issue of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, around which discussions of the movement have long coalesced, and his name appears throughout their collective body of work. To say only that ‘Barthes influenced language poetry’, however, is an oversimplification, avoiding the kind of interrogation of ‘influence’ that Barthes’ work itself demands. This article examines the relationship between Barthes’ texts and the episode in publishing history which might be taken as the ‘birth’ of ‘language poetry’: the mini-anthology ‘The Dwelling-Place’, edited by Ron Silliman. There, for the first time, a ‘language-centred tendency’ was first identified; indeed, it was self-identified, Silliman positioning himself as, and going on to become, a central member. At that moment of definition and origin, Barthes was present: *Writing Degree Zero* provides the name of the anthology, and his theory the basis of Silliman’s brief accompanying essay, ‘Surprised by Sign’. I shall identify here why Barthes was so important, what he offered to language writing, and what we can learn about both this poetry and about Barthes by reading them in the way Silliman first suggested in 1975.

In the 1970s, a group of writers arose who reacted against both confessional poetry and even the more experimental ‘New American Poetry’ which encompassed Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer as well as the New York and Black Mountain schools. This response has been said to have ‘emphasized the arbitrariness of signification and the constructive character of meaning-making’.<sup>1</sup> They did this in such a variety of ways that the writers grouped under the label are often so dissimilar as to make it close to meaningless, but the idea of ‘language poetry’, or ‘language-centred writing’, has proven remarkably persistent (even when some of its ‘members’ have disavowed it). The constellation of names chosen

often centres around those who published in the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews from 1978 to 1981; the name of the 'movement' sometimes takes this spelling. Alan Davies in his 1980 'Essai à clef', published three months after Barthes' death, wrote that *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine owed 'its existence[,] or if not, the meaning of that existence, to the significant desire-producing language mechanisms which Mr. Barthes constantly refurnished with his analyses of/as text'.<sup>2</sup> However, writers whose work might broadly be considered to be 'language-centred' had been gathering near the San Francisco Bay Area for some time before *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was founded.

One of the first places where some of the people now thought of as Language writers were grouped was in the poet Jerome Rothenberg's magazine *Alcheringa*. In 1975, this publication, usually devoted to 'ethnopoetics',<sup>3</sup> published 'The Dwelling-Place', a mini-anthology of 'new poets' along with an essay, 'Surprised by Sign (Notes on Nine)', designed to explain this highly experimental work to its readers. The poets were: Bruce Andrews, Barbara Baracks, Clark Coolidge, Lee DeJasu, Robert Grenier, David Melnick, Ray DiPalma, Barrett Watten, and Ron Silliman. The collection had been assembled and the essay authored by the San-Francisco-based Silliman, and the essay is dated 'Christmas, 1973'. Silliman's essay is only three pages long and is divided into two sections, the first consisting of six numbered paragraphs describing the poets' 'community of concern for language' ('Surprised', p. 118) and the second taking each poet and briefly summarising his or her bibliography and poetics. The essay's sixth paragraph contains its most direct engagement with Barthes, as it aims to explain the title of the anthology taken from Annette Lavers and Colin Smith's translation of *Writing Degree Zero*, and specifically from the essay 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', where Barthes says that:

it is the word which is 'the dwelling place' [...] it shines with an infinite freedom and prepares to radiate towards innumerable uncertain and possible connections. Fixed connections being abolished, the word is left only with a vertical project, it is like a monolith, or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections[.]<sup>4</sup>

This idea of the 'word' is central for Silliman and, he argues, for the other eight poets collected here as well. For Robert Grenier (one of the

poets collected), he says, the word is ‘the material of writing’, ‘a point’, a seed.<sup>5</sup> Grenier argues in an earlier essay that the patterns and conventions of speech invisibly restrict the possibilities of language because we cannot get away from them ‘until a writing clears the air’.<sup>6</sup> In speech, ‘words, silences and their common mobility are launched towards a meaning superseded’ by the flow and duration of moving time (*WDZ*, p. 11, cf. pp. 19-20), and that flow is what Grenier seeks to clear away. Silliman draws attention to the conflict between Grenier’s view of writing as coming from the word as resistive point, or as seed which will germinate, and Clark Coolidge’s, which sees it as coming out of the plane of language. Barthes comes close to that idea in ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, but it is from Grenier’s side, that of the individual word as dwelling-place, which ‘contains simultaneously all the acceptations from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose [...] and is reduced to a sort of zero degree, pregnant with all past and future specifications’ (*WDZ*, p. 48). Writing, for Barthes and Grenier both, ‘is always rooted in something beyond language, it develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence and holds the threat of a secret, it is an anti-communication, it is intimidating’ (*WDZ*, p. 20).

This last quotation is from the essay ‘Political Modes of Writing’, and it encapsulates not only Grenier and Coolidge’s arguments for the organic nature of writing but also the political justification for writing this way in all the poets, and particularly in Andrews. As Marjorie Perloff has pointed out in an essay on Andrews’ work from the early 1970s, even these early texts display the political concerns that characterise his contributions to poetics. The long, list-like forms of the poems Perloff examines, moving diagonally left to right down the page, seek a situation where, as Andrews says, ‘[r]eferentiality is diminished by organizing the language around other features or axes [...] their physicality’.<sup>7</sup> ‘Our vocabulary, this catalogue implies, is not adequate to what happens around us’.<sup>8</sup> Andrews’ use of relationships between words (‘crypto-structures’), or lack thereof, is such that ‘the reader ha[s] to do an unusual amount of work in constructing the text’.<sup>9</sup> In ‘The Dwelling-Place’, the texts included are more like clouds, spread in a less orderly way across the page, so that Perloff’s elaborate reading of the list-like poems as mocking highly codified Renaissance lyric is even harder to apply, and our writerly construction work is increased even more. Two are a mixture of real words with no context and *zaum*, much like David Melnick’s *Pcoet*, but without the same impact given that Andrews’ are not part of a single project.<sup>10</sup> The middle poem of the three, however,

'Lenin and Philosophy' (p. 105), is composed of phrases which look more like fragments, even fragments of speech, a relationship being established between a 'speaker' and listener ('listen!').<sup>11</sup> Yet even in this very short poem, that relationship is disrupted, and its creation and disruption become two poles (or two borders, '2 oceans', Atlantic and Pacific) of a poem that tries to examine it. It has to be built, it seems, in order to take it apart – 'talk to interrupt'. What is being tested here is Andrews' commitment to the notion of authorial self-erasure of the kind 'The Death of the Author' proposes certain modern writers are already working towards.<sup>12</sup>

### 'Modern Poetry'?

Silliman's idea of Barthes in 'Surprised by Sign', however, is rather different. Some of the language writers were charmed by *Writing Degree Zero*, enough to pick and choose rhetorical passages from it, but apparently not enough to want to wrestle with it and try to reconcile its flaws. For instance, this early Barthes' conception of 'modern poetics' is simplistic, apparently under-researched, and not formulated with English-language modernisms in mind. Unlike the boundary between readerly and writerly, over which Barthes admits he will 'stumble' and 'err',<sup>13</sup> the classical/modern distinction is a more rigid critical tool:

in classical art, a ready-made thought generates an utterance which 'expresses' or 'translates' it. [...] In modern poetics, on the contrary, words produce a kind of formal continuum from which there gradually emanates an intellectual or emotional density which would have been impossible without them; speech is then the solidified time of a more spiritual gestation, during which the 'thought' is prepared, installed little by little by the contingency of words. (*WDZ*, p. 43)

It is not exactly clear what corpus of poetry Barthes intends by the 'modern', or indeed whether he is always talking about the same thing. Strategies and effects differ so greatly within the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that we cannot imagine that 'modern' is just a time period. Commentators have linked a variety of the values of innovative poetries to the *scriptible* articulated by the future Barthes, but not all of these poets are going to conform to all of the standards or agree with all

of the terms.<sup>14</sup> One glaring example here is the idea of ‘speech’ (*parole*, which is also the French replaced by ‘utterance’ in the passage quoted above), with which Grenier took issue in his short 1970 essay ‘On Speech’, which Silliman was later to include in his seminal anthology of language writing *In the American Tree* (1986). There Grenier asks, ‘where are the words most themselves?’<sup>15</sup> He seeks the answer to this question in the very core of modernism which he sees as ‘where words are born’, his two examples being Zukofsky’s ‘azure / as ever / adz aver’ and Stein’s ‘Roast potatoes for’.

The Zukofsky is a short poem entitled ‘Azure’, perhaps partly in homage to Mallarmé, who uses the word ‘azur’ instead of ‘ciel’ in order to refer to the sky without saying ‘heaven’, thus expressing spiritual crisis and ‘concretizing the void’.<sup>16</sup> In Zukofsky’s piece, the word ‘adz’ could be read as ‘adze’ (an ancient tool) or as ‘ads’, advertisements, spelled phonetically. One of these two things is bearing witness, ‘averring’, to ‘azure as ever’ – the enduring (‘ever’) fact that the sky is blue (‘azure’). The poem functions by a ‘linguistic lapping [...] the rushing and receding of perception’.<sup>17</sup> In such a concentrated poem, a small space with such a great plurality of meanings, different ideas present themselves to different readers, or as a single reader’s attention shifts from one element to another. This is a specifically flexible form of the ‘intellectual or emotional density’ that Barthes says ‘gradually emanates’ (*WDZ*, p. 43) *from* words, for while the meanings fluctuate, the words function to ‘concretise’ the text. Similarly, Stein demonstrates her belief that by modern poetry’s new treatment of words, meaning, which has become heavily codified in literature, can be revitalised.<sup>18</sup> In her lecture ‘Poetry as Grammar’, she says: ‘I knew nouns must go in poetry [...] if anything that is everything was to go on meaning something’.<sup>19</sup> Stein’s prose, even from her lectures and ‘critical’ texts, is difficult to quote from concisely because of the way she builds meaning cumulatively, but by this point in ‘Poetry as Grammar’ ‘nouns’ have come to be seen as the most sign-like of words. This predates the literary semiotics of Barthes or even of Hjeltmslev, and Stein has not been shown to have engaged with Saussure, but a statement like ‘slowly if you feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known’ (p. 314) suggests that one holds to some notion of the arbitrary link between the ‘name by which [something] is known’ (signifier) and the signified. It would be difficult to bring this into complete alignment with Barthes, but they could certainly be described using Silliman on ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ as accessing the ‘totality of meanings’ which we access in the absence of

'fixed connections'. Silliman was later to write: 'By removal of context, Grenier prevents most leaps beyond the level of grammatic integration'.<sup>20</sup> Stein's work operates on this basis too: words with no context beyond their grammar stop us 'leaping' to thematics and force us to attend to them ourselves, rather than expecting them to be arranged for us by an author. Certainly Grenier's own poetry does not refuse to refer but rather engages in this 'disruption of context'. His *Sentences* consists of five hundred five-by-eight-inch index cards, each featuring a short poem.<sup>21</sup> Although these poems are a kind of 'sequence', it is hard to be sure one has read the whole text, making linear reading impossible and, as with the similar compression effects we see in Zukosky and Stein, forcing us into an alternative, reader-directed strategy of consumption.

All of the poems in 'The Dwelling-Place', and the later works of these writers, rely on these alternative serialities, like Baracks' paragraphs where phrases and sentences do not build towards an argument or story, DiPalma's columns of words, or Coolidge's lines derived from the dictionary and thus arbitrarily organised from the point of view of meaning. While 'On Speech' is a starting-point, Silliman is trying to define beyond Grenier here, to extract something from Barthes which is more than just better access to an object but a 'frontal', 'simultaneous' journey or wandering through language, the poems 'produced and consumed with a peculiar curiosity, a kind of sacred relish' (*WDZ*, p. 48). Barthes' metaphor of hunger here has to be looked at closely, and we see that Jonathan Culler's translation of 'voracious' would be misleading in this connection.<sup>22</sup> The signs are, rather, *sur-nourrisants*, 'overnourishing', so that the reading strategy that is adopted is on the order of the nibble or graze. The 'proposed waterpoems of Jim Rosenberg', 'the reader to swim from term to term' (p. 119), are held up in the essay as examples. Whether it is between small texts of a few lines (Grenier), between phrases within a paragraph (Baracks), or even individual words within a poem (DiPalma's third poem, 'ground waters graced'), what Silliman finds worthy of attention is this casual relationship in which consumption is directed by the reader. It is this that he will return to theorise in 'The New Sentence', where he holds up the sentence as the unit of poetry, but he says there that Coolidge 'resists even that much integrating energy', that his phrases are 'decontextualised [...] readymades' (*NS*, p. 88). Let us look now at that process of 'resistance' and see how closely it resembles the liberated signifier Barthes imagines.

## Clark Coolidge

Barthes says in ‘The Death of the Author’ that the writer’s ‘only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them’ (*IMT*, p. 145). This ‘only power’, however, leaves considerable scope for the many practices of modern poetry, and some of these might indeed involve ‘intentionality’ and ‘skill’, if these things can take place in the constant (continuous, *pace* Stein) present of the ‘modern scriptor’ in which ‘language [...] ceaselessly calls into question all origins’ (*IMT*, p. 145-56). It is not Barthes’ contention that all writing is unconscious or automatic, or that there is no difference between an unpracticed writer and a ‘skilled’ one.<sup>23</sup> The difference is that for Barthes, ‘refusing to assign a “secret”, an ultimate meaning, to the text’ is seen in the abstract as something it is desired Barthes’ ideal *scriptor* and/or writerly reader will do (p. 147). This is the case for Coolidge’s critics, who admire him for his ‘concrete detail’<sup>24</sup> and the radical attempt to access things and the world directly, which is judged to be a virtue in the following terms: ‘We can ask of a person or a work of art, if we feel the authority, nothing more than a wholeness of intention in the willing of one thing – “the very so”’.<sup>25</sup> This is a quotation from Coolidge’s 1974 work, *The Maintains*:

very such small  
the very so  
such a such  
lasts even or as means are about the so  
said so to say mingles means and maybes<sup>26</sup>

Here, at the end of the book, a metapoetic comment is being made which is largely avoided in Coolidge; usually, the avoidance of grammar and ordinary-language meaning is such that we cannot sensibly paraphrase them, and criticism does better when it focusses on formal procedures and techniques, which include that very semantic evasiveness. Although the exact procedure is unclear, we are told that *The Maintains* is a long poem made primarily out of language from the dictionary, a strategy which Barrett Watten reads as itself intended to make a point about language: ‘*The Maintains* offers a metonym [...] the definiendum is the “part” to the “whole” of the semantic component in language, which is ironically addressed’.<sup>27</sup> Coolidge is ironising a view of language that reduces its operations to this metonymic way of accessing semantic correspondences through the dictionary. By contrast, the alternative view

of language is that expressed by this metapoetic end comment which considers 'the so' or essential nature the poet has managed to reach with these procedures. The phrase 'such a such' plays on 'such and such', emphasising its opposite meaning: 'so much this very thing', not 'this vague collection of things'. Yet paradoxically it is arrived at by a process which 'mingles means and maybes' – combines the dictionary definitions of words with other associations evoked by the procedure of putting them next to one another (and alliterating them to bring them even closer, a procedure not common in the rest of the book; there are exceptions, but not a collection of alliterative words with this density). 'Fixed connections being abolished', as Barthes says, this is what replaces them.

However, Silliman in 'Surprised by Sign' would not have been considering *The Maintains*, or at least only incomplete sections of it he might have read in journals. More likely he would have been thinking of *The So*, which Coolidge himself is referencing here. Bernstein draws on this too, unBarthesian in his aligning of 'the authority' and 'the wholeness of intention'.<sup>28</sup> What it would mean for 'the so' of *The So* to be an 'authority' can be refined by comparison with the reading of some of the poems of that collection, which were also included in *Space* (1970), by Tom Orange. He has it that 'sound is leading sense', and Coolidge has in his 'concentration on sound, relationality, and denotative resistances' 'tapped into the kind of verbal energy' that his own earlier work, and that other poets of the time such as Kenneth Koch and Ted Berrigan, were, says Orange, unable to reach.<sup>29</sup> For while some texts of the New York School (an appellation not quite as problematic as 'language writing', but still complicated) were uninterested in theoretical writing on language as a resource for poetry, others were important touchstones for the experiments of writers like Charles Bernstein, who cites Koch's 'When the Sun Tries to Go On' as a text which works with 'incapacity and awkwardness and fragmentation as an experimental dimension'.<sup>30</sup> For Orange, Coolidge manages to master that incapacity, to 'tap into' the 'energy' of these paralinguistic functions which other poets did not know how to control.

This is refined in 'The Death of the Author' from the raw material of *Writing Degree Zero*. The earlier Barthes imagines 'a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author's personal and secret mythology, that subnature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place' (*WDZ*, p. 10). However, in 'The Death of the Author', the 'subnature of expression' is

replaced by ‘inscription’ and the text becomes ‘a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself’ (*IMT*, p. 146). Silliman in his essay ‘Ubeity’ (hailed as one of the most important early commentaries on Coolidge)<sup>31</sup> writes that ‘content’ in *Space and The Maintains* is close to ‘the “coherence” by which Roland Barthes defines reality in a language system’, going on to declare: ‘Coolidge has in fact created both’.<sup>32</sup> ‘Ubeity’ also includes that same quotation from Barthes as ‘Surprised by Sign’ as one of its epigraphs, and defines its titular concept as the ‘horizontal dimension’ of the meaning of a word, which is ‘no longer just the interface of its acoustic form and its aim at the image-track, it is also its location and aim [...] at earlier and later occurrences’.<sup>33</sup> Barthes speaks of the ‘vertical project’ of modern poetry after fixed connections, so we can see Silliman’s ‘horizontal’ as the new connections which replace the contextual claims of the classical to structure an ethics, a humanism. ‘Modern poetry’, as exemplified for Barthes by Char, ‘is beyond this diffuse tone, this precious aura, which are, indeed, a mode of writing, usually termed poetic feeling’ (*WDZ*, p. 51). As we have seen, Barthes in ‘Myth Today’ sees poetry’s posited reality as something ‘ultimately impermeable, irreducible’.<sup>34</sup> Does this apply to modern poetry as well, in the terms of this opposition to classical poetry? Barthes’ ‘modern poetry’ bears a different relationship to reality than was striven for in ‘classical poetry’ (*WDZ*, pp. 47-49), but they cannot be entirely conflated with the ‘writerly’ texts he discusses in his later work. However we account for these discrepancies in Barthes’ thought, for Silliman it is not entirely the theoretical ideas themselves but often the styling of a theorist’s expressions that makes them ‘so useful, suggestive, and quotable to poets’ (*NS*, p. 70). Likewise, at the end of his essay on Coolidge, Charles Bernstein writes: ‘Poetry need not win a philosophical argument; it shows, in its purity, what it wants and what it cares about’.<sup>35</sup>

Critics who nevertheless attempt these thematic interpretations often arrive at them by assuming metapoetic allegories, a class of reading worth considering. Michael Golston, in suggesting that Coolidge’s work attempts to blend poetry and photography, drafts Barthes into his argument, but I will not examine this here as he (rightly) avoids suggesting Coolidge is making direct use of Barthes’ ideas. However, Golston’s thesis is that Coolidge’s career ‘can be read as as an ongoing, allegorical enactment of the process of filmmaking, from its initial phase as a microlevel chemical process of crystal distillation (in *Space and The Maintains*)’ and on throughout the process of film production in his later

books.<sup>36</sup> The beginning of this tenuous argument is the assertion that *Space* ‘metaphorically equates words and rocks [...] the first step in allegorically transcoding photography and poetry by writing film’s material (crystalline) ground’.<sup>37</sup> Golston’s evidence for this is to select certain phrases from Coolidge’s work and see them as metapoetic comments, reading for instance the line ‘trilobite trilobites’ as describing the poems.<sup>38</sup> Golston’s commentary on that passage is problematic:

While the words here resist referring in any obvious manner to a discernible subject, they do point to one another within the form of the poem itself, which can be read as a constellation of words with certain semantic and syntactic possibilities.<sup>39</sup>

This fails to take into account that the poem itself might be a ‘discernible subject’, and that metapoetic readings, while not automatically irrelevant, are not ‘obvious’. When dealing with poems that are made up of language and concerned with language, poetry becomes a very readily discernible subject, but Golston’s formulation is an example of how that can be overly reductive. He sees the poem as being, once we have accounted for ‘the obvious peculiarities of such writing’, more or less an ordinary-language statement about its own operation. Silliman reads Coolidge very differently. He sees the works as ‘non-referring structures’ and quotes Tom Clark’s description of Coolidge’s text ‘The Clark Coolidge Code Angle’: ‘words are a surface intended to reveal “Neural activity [...] a multiplicity of simultaneous operations functioning in a continuum.”’<sup>40</sup> The important difference here is in the words ‘reveal’ and ‘angle’: Silliman and Clark appear to believe that the mind or brain’s internal functions are actually depicted, and not just allegorised, in Coolidge’s work.<sup>41</sup> This is part of what prompts Silliman to refer to Barthes in the first place, saying that in the passage above quoted from ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, Barthes ‘confronts diminished referentiality as achieved by effacing *connections*’.<sup>42</sup> Sam Ladkin explores Coolidge’s backing-out of the notion of the non-referential, insisted on in one interview with Barrett Watten but then retracted years later,<sup>43</sup> and so Silliman’s compromise is that it can be worked towards in this effacement, which reveals the underlying nature of the word. The poems are metapoetic in the sense that they show us something about poetry (as, in a sense, all poems do), but it is possible to extract those discoveries without reading *Space* or *The Maintains* as coded *ars poetica*.

## David Melnick

This independence from even metapoetic meaning is far more evident in a work like David Melnick's *Pcoet*, and in some ways Melnick an outer bound for Silliman. 'Even Melnick's metalanguage is based on its relation to a vocabulary of *derived* terms'.<sup>44</sup> In 'Literature as Metalanguage', Barthes considers that experimental literature (he mentions Robbe-Grillet), in becoming self-reflexive, enters 'that asymptotic zone where literature appears to destroy itself as a language object without destroying itself as a metalanguage'.<sup>45</sup> This seems to be the boundary we have just been negotiating with Coolidge, but I do not believe 'Surprised by Sign' is drawing on this sense of the term 'metalanguage'. Rather, Silliman applies it to *zaum*: 'not simply neologisms or distortions of existing language, but letters and phonemes structured largely out of [the poet's] sense of sound'.<sup>46</sup> Melnick's *zaum*-like operations are for Silliman something which by its very nature as sound takes on certain properties and qualities of language, activating meaning-forming impulses which are frustrated, producing a cloud of possible associations which gestures beyond, *meta*-, language. In so doing, it comments upon the limitations of what language makes comprehensible, as meta-physics addresses that which lies beyond the world comprehensible to physics. The title *Pcoet* suggests 'poet' and 'pocket', and this sense of doubleness and play works throughout the book, for the operations of a given page:

sadd bier  
           metapoif  
 lid      cift      ure,  
           hid      tyer<sup>47</sup>

The first line has an approximate ordinary-language reading which is vaguely comical, which is found elsewhere *Pcoet* – like the unexpected 'sod you' in the middle of poem 41 – as here 'sad beer' evokes the phrase 'to cry in one's beer', to feel sorry for oneself.<sup>48</sup> The double d in 'sadd' suggests a slow, mournful delivery, perhaps to the point of irony. But a 'bier' spelled thus is more sincerely solemn, a stand on which a coffin is placed and carried. The next line's 'lid' and 'cift' suggest the lid of the coffin, the coffin itself with the c, f, and i of 'cift', and the conflation of the two words into 'lift'. Then, 'ure' is close to 'urn' but also gives 'your' phonetically, giving the vague sense this is all addressed to a companion.

When reading *Pcoet*, we flick through our reading strategies almost at random, like the cards of Grenier's *Sentences*. Part of what separates this from another kind of poem is that there is no preferred or 'right' thematic reading on which we are likely to agree.

When these operations are aligned with 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', we can say that these poets' 'words' have 'abolished' *fixed* connections, but they generate instead multiple 'possible' connections. *Pcoet* takes the examination of language that is possible in Grenier and Coolidge to another level: in 'modern poetry', says Barthes, 'there lies a sort of existential geology, in which is gathered the total content of the Name' (*WDZ*, p. 48), but in *Pcoet*, that 'geology' (which I take to include striation, distribution over levels) is shown to extend beyond the established Saussurean arbitrary signifier. The property of meaning extends even beyond the 'Name'. Silliman phrases it as if to diminish that quality and reign it in, tying it to Barthes – Melnick's 'terms' are 'derived' – and thus to the work of the other eight poets in the collection, who all, Silliman says, do their best to 'diminish the reference' of words and thus 'redistribute' the 'balance', forcing it over to sound or structure or some other element.<sup>49</sup> Melnick's next major work was to be *Men in Aïda* (1983), which takes the sounds of Homer's *Iliad* and repells them so they can be understood as English.<sup>50</sup> Thus, *Menin aeide thea Peleiadeo Achileos* ('sing, goddess, of the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus') becomes 'Men in Aïda, they appeal, eh? A day, O Achilles!' Language is put to an extreme test, for as in *Pcoet*, we see that forming words gives no guarantees as to the assumptions of communication and comprehension on which authorship relies.

## New Paradigms

Silliman writes: 'As horizontal associations suggest movement, a narration of affect, the vertical proposes paradigms' (p. 119). We can read in this the start of his interest in the sentence rather than the word. 'The New Sentence' criticises Barthes' view of the sentence in *Writing Degree Zero*. There is a moment, says Silliman, 'not specifically identified by Barthes' beyond that general label of 'modern' poetry, 'when the signifier, freed suddenly from its servitude to an integrating hierarchy of syntactic relations, finds itself drained of any signified' (*NS*, p. 76). Talk of the signifier and signified is spread throughout Silliman's poems, yet this is not in absolute capitulation to that way of seeing language: 'structuralism, another god'<sup>51</sup> is one of the sentences towards the end of

*Tjanting*. Silliman also contrasts his new sentence with the unit-scheme of the structuralist literary interpretation *par excellence* he finds in *S/Z* – he reads the splitting of the text into the ‘arbitrary’ lexia as part of linguistic and literary analysis’ evasion of the question of the sentence (*NS*, p. 75). However, Silliman’s reading, although seeing that *S/Z* wanders from the ‘arbitrary’ boundaries it sets up, does not address the challenge this poses to structuralism. Barthes himself calls for a new theory of the sentence in ‘To Write: An Intransitive Verb?’: ‘Discourse is not simply an adding together of sentences; it is, itself, one great sentence’, which is to say, the work is a homology of the sentence.<sup>52</sup> Silliman draws from Barthes an assertion that writing has moved from being focussed on the syntagmatic to the paradigmatic, which I read as his parsing of the part of ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ where it is posited that connections may become, if not ‘abolished’, then ‘reserved areas, a parody of themselves, and this void is necessary for the density of the Word to rise’ (*WDZ*, p. 47). Bernstein indicates something similar in his poem ‘In Parts’, where the cancelled line ‘~~we can’t avoid structure~~’ becomes, on the next line, ‘a void structure’.<sup>53</sup> If, as Silliman contends, poems have moved from ‘servitude to an integrating hierarchy’ (‘The New Sentence’) to a duty to ‘vertical’ paradigms proposed by the newly independent Word (‘Surprised by Sign’), then the sentence, homologically linked to discourse, is the ideal formal device.

However, two paragraphs are cut from this section in the later version of the essay. In the earlier, Silliman says that Barthes was ‘wrong’ in saying that there has been an overall shift from syntagm to paradigm, and imposes a specifically class-based distinction on the paradigm-syntagm opposition, saying that these ‘poles [...] have become more and more identified with the limits, respectively, of high and low art’.<sup>54</sup> He also cites the work of the poet Helen Adam as an instance of ‘high lumpen art’ which also shows how poetry ‘can still aspire to the condition of low art’, enjoyed by those beyond the elite. Adam, whose work explored the ballad tradition as a participant in the innovative scene of the San Francisco Renaissance, offered Duncan and others ‘the missing link to the tradition’.<sup>55</sup> Adam’s ‘lumpen art’ brought the once possible phenomenon of non-literary poetry into the present, imagining ballads not as culturally privileged forms but as everyday storytelling which did not require education for access. Silliman is correct that Barthes’ characterisation of the shift is unsubtle, as *Writing Degree Zero* so often is, especially on the subjects of poetry and history.

Much remains to be said about the responses language writing was to go on to have to Barthes, and to poststructuralist theory in general. The scope of this essay has been to read the Barthes in 'The Dwelling-Place' and to show how, by acknowledging the intertextual relationship between 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' and the poetry it showcases, we can become more generous and productive readers of that enormously influential early work. This, in turn, will provide the framework for a reading of postmodern and contemporary poetry which accounts for Barthes' contributions to our understanding of writing and culture. However, the texts we have looked at are only the beginning; language poetry went on to be known primarily as the writing published in the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and Barthes was to remain a part of that, so much so that in the magazine's obituary to Barthes, Alan Davies writes that 'this magazine owes its existence or if not, the meaning of that existence, to the significant desire-producing mechanisms which Mr. Barthes constantly refurnished with his analyses of/as text'.<sup>56</sup> Barthes, says Davies, saw that critical writing, either literary criticism or a discourse across poetry and poetics which is in some way critical, should take as its task not the reading of the text, but its writing. This is the status of much of the poetics of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and after, but then Davies goes on to propose that the writer – author – 'evaporates facing the sign of a question', that is, in the face of the investigation posed by the critical reader's participation in the writing of the text. Timothy Yu writes that 'Silliman's utopian gamble, and the gamble of all language writing, is that experimental techniques can render the language poem both particular and universal'.<sup>57</sup> The effacements of the subject theorised by these poets in the language of Barthes may in fact preserve structural inequalities in discourse, which remains a troubling part of the legacy of early language writing. Whether we read this poetry as *Writing Degree Zero* and 'The Death of the Author' in action, or merely as the consequence of these two popular texts being read in limited terms by a certain group of writers at a certain moment in history, acknowledging issues such as these helps us reflect on the implications of Barthes' theory. Freedom for the signifier and exemption from meaning may be Barthes' 'utopian' dream, but putting it into practice creates new questions which cannot be solved merely by returning to the same few pages of Barthes. A renewed investigation of the responsibilities of language must begin, in which both poetry and theory have their parts to play.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Oren Izenberg, 'Language Poetry', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 784.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Davies, 'Essai à Clef', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, 3.12 (June 1980) <<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/LANGUAGEn12/pictures/045.html>> [accessed 28 May 2014], unpag.

<sup>3</sup> *Alcheringa* was founded in 1970 to publish what it calls 'tribal poetries' from around the world. In 1975 the 'New Series' began, which continued the original mission but began to include 'modern experiments': 'songs, chants, prayers, visions and dreams, sacred narratives, fictional narratives, histories, ritual scenarios, praises, namings, word games, riddles, proverbs, sermons'. Dennis Tedlock and Jerome Rothenberg, 'The Ways of Alcheringa', *Alcheringa*, New Series 1.1 (1975), 2-3 (p. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968), p. 47 (hereafter *WDZ*); quoted in Ron Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', *Alcheringa*, New Series 1.1 (1975), 118-20 (p. 118).

<sup>5</sup> Silliman, 'Surprised', p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Grenier, 'On Speech', in *In The American Tree*, ed. by Ron Silliman (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), pp. 477-78 (p. 477). The essay was first published in the magazine *This*, edited by Grenier and Watten, in 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Andrews, 'Text and Context', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'A Syntax of Contrariety', *Aerial*, 9 (1997), 234-38, available in unpaginated form at <<http://marjorieperloff.com/stein-duchamp-picasso/andrews-contrariety/>> [accessed 23 June 2014].

<sup>9</sup> Perloff, 'A Syntax of Contrariety', unpag.

<sup>10</sup> *Zaum* is a Russian Futurist poetic technique making use of words which, while denoting nothing, look like the language of the poet and usually appear (almost) pronounceable.

<sup>11</sup> This title is that of a collection of essays by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, published in English a few years before this poem appeared. See *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). It is likely also a reference to Althusser's theory of 'interpellation', the idea that subjectivity is created by the institutions of

society, and which this poetry which effaces established connections aims to draw attention to and perhaps break down.

<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 143-44 (hereafter *IMT*).

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 57-58, and Nerys Williams, *Reading Error: The Lyric and Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Grenier, 'On Speech', pp. 477-78.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Michael Weinfield's commentary on Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. by Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> Marnie Parsons, *Touch Monkeys* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 101-02.

<sup>18</sup> This process, Stein believes, has been taking place since the Renaissance, but especially in the nineteenth century to which she is most directly reacting. Lew Welch appropriates one of Stein's own phrases (from her 'Portrait' of Bernard Faÿ) to describe her use of words: 'They are found able and edible. And so they are predetermined and trimmed'. Lew Welch, *How I Read Gertrude Stein* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', in *Writings 1932-1946* (New York: Library of America, 1998), p. 334. Apparently Stein responded to a student's question after giving this lecture by saying that in her own famous phrase 'a rose is a rose is a rose', 'the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years'. Gertrude Stein, *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. vi.

<sup>20</sup> Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987), p. 87 (hereafter *NS*).

<sup>21</sup> The publisher, Whale Cloth Press, has made the work available online <[http://www.whalecloth.org/grenier/sentences\\_.htm](http://www.whalecloth.org/grenier/sentences_.htm)> [accessed 11th April 2014]. In 2011, newly-discovered copies retrieved from a forgotten storage unit sold for \$1,000 each. Al Filreis, 'Twenty-six Boxes Containing Grenier's "Sentences" Discovered', *Jacket*, 2 (31 July 2011) <<https://jacket2.org/commentary/twenty-six-boxes-containing-greniers-sentences-discovered>> [accessed 11 April 2014].

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, (London and New York Routledge, 2002), p. 201. I retain Culler's translation, but Lavers and Smith's translation renders *signes surnourrissants* (Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols. [Paris: Seuil, 2002], vol. I, p. 200) rather more accurately as 'over-nourishing

signs' (WDZ, p. 48) for Culler's 'voracious'. 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' supplies a surfeit of metaphors for the poetic act which glorify it as a function of the liberated sign.

<sup>23</sup> In one interview, Barthes expresses his distaste for automatic writing, saying that it produces 'the stereotype'. Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 243.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Halsey, 'From a Diary of Reading Clark Coolidge', *Jacket*, 13 (April 2001) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/13/coolidge-halsey.html>> [accessed 1 May 2014].

<sup>25</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Maintaining Space: Clark Coolidge's Early Work', in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), pp. 259-65 (p. 265).

<sup>26</sup> Clark Coolidge, *The Maintains* (San Francisco: This Press, 1974), p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 104.

<sup>28</sup> Bernstein, 'Maintaining Space', p. 265. In Bernstein the difference between these ideas seems to be trivial, whereas in Barthes, intention is only part of authority. In 'From Work to Text', intention is part of a broader 'filiation', whereby the author is 'the father and the owner' of the work. This means attention to that author's 'declared intentions' for 'literary science', whereas for society it is a question of legal ownership (*IMT*, p. 160). We might say that for language writing (or at least for Bernstein here, perhaps Andrews and Silliman too), intention is every bit as politically important as the general social notion of 'authority'. See also Clark Coolidge, *The So: Poems 1966* (San Francisco: This Press, 1974).

<sup>29</sup> Tom Orange, 'Arrangement and Density: A Context for Early Clark Coolidge', *Jacket*, 13 (April 2001) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/13/coolidge-o-a.html>> [accessed 15 April 2014].

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 191.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Maillet, 'Critical Approaches to Arrangement, Sound, and Syntax in the Poetry of Clark Coolidge: An Annotated Bibliography', University of Louisiana-Lafayette website, 10 November 2011 <<http://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~amm7811/biblio.html>> [accessed 15 April 2014]; Sam Ladkin, 'Glancing Paintings and Poems: Figuration and Abstraction in Clark Coolidge's *Polaroid* and Willem de Kooning's *Excavation*', *Textual Practice*, 26.3 (2012), 421-48 (p. 436).

<sup>32</sup> Ron Silliman, 'Ubeity', *Stations*, 5, 'A Symposium on Clark Coolidge' (Winter 1978), p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Silliman, 'Ubeity', p. 26.

<sup>34</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 158. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>35</sup> Bernstein, 'Maintaining Space', p. 265.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Golston, 'At Clark Coolidge: Allegory and the Early Works', *American Literary History*, 13.2 (Summer 2001), 295-316 (p. 296).

<sup>37</sup> Golston, 'At Clark Coolidge', p. 298.

<sup>38</sup> Clark Coolidge, *Space* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> Golston, 'At Clark Coolidge', p. 296.

<sup>40</sup> Silliman, 'Surprised by Sign', p. 118; Tom Clark, 'What if Jimi Hendrix...?', *Big Sky*, 3 (1972)

<<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/BIGSKY/html/pictures/003.html>> [accessed 11 April 2014].

<sup>41</sup> 'The direct experience of the brain is always invisible', says Tom Clark in 'What if Jimi Hendrix...?', but there is an implicit suggestion throughout this piece that certain poetic practices provide access to these reading operations. This idea runs the length of language poetry, retained in Bernstein's 'Artifice of Absorption'. Moreover, a mutual interest between language poetry and cognitive poetics is signalled in George Lakoff's essays in *Poetics Journal* Issues 1 and 6.

<sup>42</sup> Silliman, 'Surprised', p. 118. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>43</sup> Ladkin, 'Glancing Paintings and Poems', p. 436.

<sup>44</sup> Silliman, 'Surprised', p. 118. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 98.

<sup>46</sup> Silliman, 'Surprised', p. 120.

<sup>47</sup> David Melnick, *Pcoet* (San Francisco: G.A.W.K., 1975), unpag. (Section 11). Silliman refers to this book in his essay dated Christmas 1973, so he likely saw it before publication.

<sup>48</sup> Richard A. Spears, *McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs* (Chicago: McGraw-Hill, 2005), p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> Silliman, 'Surprised', p. 118.

<sup>50</sup> This form is known as a homophonic translation; for a thorough treatment of the topic, see Jeff Hilson, 'Homophonic Translation: Sense and Sound', in *Music, Text and Translation*, ed. by Helen Julia Minors (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 95-105.

<sup>51</sup> Ron Silliman, *Tjanting* (Cambridge: Salt, 2002 [1981]), p. 156.

<sup>52</sup> Roland Barthes, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb' in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 134-56 (p. 136).

<sup>53</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Girly Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> Ron Silliman, 'The New Sentence', in *Claims for Poetry*, ed. by Donald Hall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), pp. 377-98 (p. 382).

<sup>55</sup> Duncan's biographical statement, in *The New American Poetry*, ed. by Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 435.

<sup>56</sup> Davies, 'Essai à Clef', unpag.

<sup>57</sup> Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 70.

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