

Meaning, Unmeaning & the Poetics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

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“The poems are made of what look like words and phrases but are not. I think these poems look like they should mean something more than other wordless poems do. At the same time, you know that you can’t begin to understand what they mean. [...] You are a spider strangling in your own web, suffocated by meaning. You ask to be freed by these poems from the intolerable burden of trying to understand.”

David Melnick. “A Short Word on my Work”. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1 (1978). unpaginated. [emphasis author].

The feeling of being a spider and struggling through the webs of a poem is not only felt by David Melnick, but is also felt by every reader of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Writings. The feeling of suffocation caused by (mis)understanding a poem and the ache that the heart suffers are the expressed sensualities of a passionate reader whose mind is numbed by the disorientated projections of poet’s poetry in the form of a poem. Understanding the meaning or unmeaning of a *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poem or, the necessity to produce interpretations from it creates a problematic scenario in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* writing and this becomes a crucial challenge for the studies of this particular literary genre. In this essay I will try to point out and investigate some of these problematic issues of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Writings from a reader’s perspective by concentrating on some of the major aspects of the poetics of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*.

By the word (or one may prefer it to call a phrase) *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* I not only mean the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, which Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews edited and published during February 1978 and October 1981; but the word means the whole genre of this kind of writing, for which the magazine was the leading voice. I use the phrase ‘this kind of writing’, because it is also very difficult to categorize this particular mode of writing and it is still the subject of an ongoing debate even today among the recent critical theorists. Even Ron Silliman, one of the prominent names of the movement, declares that he categorizes *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* “not [as] a *group* but a *tendency* in the work of many”¹. Silliman’s observation is

¹ As given by: Lee Bartlett. “What is “Language Poetry”?”. *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986). 742.

possibly based on the idea of continuity and it is obvious from this comment that he wants to keep the genre alive, which will inevitably die if the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing is considered as the production of only a specific 'group'. The style of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing greatly influenced, both in negative and positive ways, other writers and poets of the period, though some of them officially tried to alienate themselves from the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school like the New York School poet John Ashbery, who in an interview in the year 1985 says: "I like some of the Language Poets though I have no idea what their movement is all about?" In this essay I would prefer to call L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing as a movement or genre, though it is intriguing to call this genre as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 'Writing' because it was practically born and brought up in its early years in the form of poetry – and later some poets also produced dis/continuous verse-like prose as we find in Ron Silliman's *Tjanting* (1981), *Paradise* (1985) or Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1987).

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing, definitely received its mature voice and also got its name with the publication of the first issue of the magazine named *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. The editors of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine* could only publish thirteen issues and three supplements and the magazine ceased to exist soon after it. However, the readers should not forget the disoriented projection of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing in its early years, when journals like *This*, *Big Deals*, *Totte'ls*, *Open Letters* performed the duty of publishing this new form of experimental writing. Figure 1 shows the first issue of the magazine, which can more appropriately be called a pamphlet, because the size the magazine was 8 & 1/16" x 7 & 1/16 with a paper cover and was saddle stapled. The lead article of the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was Larry Eigner's 'Approaching Things / Some Calculus / How Figure it / Of Everyday Life Experience' (as shown in Figure 1) and the very title of the article shows that the writer is elliptically presenting his ideas. Lee Bartlett in "What is "Language Poetry"?" argues:

The journal devoted itself to poetics – whether essays, notes, or reviews – and the "house style" was, to say the least, usually as elliptic as Eigner's. While *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* published any number of writers, certain names appeared frequently: Bernstein, Andrews, Watten, Hejinian, Silliman; topics ranged from signification, sound and schizophrenia to analysis of work by Gertrude Stein, Laura (Riding) Jackson and Louis Zukofsky.²

But Bartlett and many other critics, while making a general review of Language Writing, carefully kept aside an important point of discussion: why were the 'equals' signs (=) used in 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E'? The discussion of the poetics of Language Writing from the perspective of meaning and unmeaning will probably remain incomplete if the very meaning of 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E' is not clarified. Apart from this peculiar use of 'equals' signs the word is also elliptically presented keeping all letters

² Lee Bartlett. "What is "Language Poetry"?" *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986). 743.

capitalized. These capital letters in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E work as blocks which carry heaviness of meanings. To Language writers letters are meaningfully connected to each other and for them L is equal to A, which also is equal to N and so on. While writing, by using a specific language, every letter carries the same dignity, because every letter carries the power of expression and communication, when it is tied with another letter from the same Language and forms words, sentences and a written text. Language is thus, as Julia Kristeva claims “our fundamental social code” and that what is written follows the “system of signs”, which is socially accepted and is understood by our interpretative ability.³

Keeping this point in mind it will probably be worth to look back to Charles Olson’s essay “Projective Verse”⁴. For Olson “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it [...], by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to the reader.” According to this Olsonian conception about the “FORM”-“CONTENT” relationship a poem works as a “FIELD” which creates a relationship between the poet and the reader. Olson perceived poem as “a high energy construct” and “an energy-discharge”. By using various forms, or even sometimes not using any, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writers create different possibilities to interpret the poetical verve stored in the poem. Bruce Andrews in “Text and Context” observes Language as “not a separate but a distinguishing reality” and questions, “Yet where is the energy invested?”⁵ The energy, which Olson talks about in “Projective Verse” now acts in a different way, as in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry the FORM of a ‘Poem’ exposes its artificiality and questions the reader’s experiential insight and his ability to interpret:

In dismantling the scaffolding, we create a literature – a record of negative retrieval. ‘Unreadability’ – that which requires new readers, and teaches new readings.⁶

The signs (known as letters) used by written language carry energy within themselves and it is the reader’s responsibility to get it transferred from the poet to himself. The reader is now asked to invest his Energy in understanding the ‘unreadabil(ies)’ of the “fundamental social code”. By interpreting the “system of signs” he is forced to explore the ‘unreadable’ meaning(s) of a poem expressed in the FORM of a ‘poem’ and achieves the poetical rendering of poet’s poetry.

But this notion on the other hand, problematizes some aspects of the reader’s response. The idea of presenting different forms, in most cases,

³ Julia Kristeva, “The Ethics of Linguistics”. *Poetry in Theory*. Ed. John Cook. Malden, Oxford & Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 438.

⁴ Charles Olson. “Projective Verse”. *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. Paul Hoover. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1994. 613-621. It is normally agreed that this influential essay by Charles Olson acted as the manifesto of Black Mountain School of Poetry – an experimental poetic movement started at the Black Mountain College, situated at North Carolina, U.S.A.

⁵ Bruce Andrews. “Text and Context”. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. 31.

⁶ Andrews, “Text” 31.

disengages the readers from the written poem. Stephen Fredman observes that for these poets the “activity of [...] investigating a text into an endless play of subtexts, is means of poetic creation”⁷. However, Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, clearly declare:

We have emphasized a spectrum of writing that places its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, programme or subject matter [...] and to develop more fully the latticework of those involved in aesthetically related activity.⁸

Fredman’s idea therefore, on one hand, supports the characteristics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing, but on the other hand we observe, he definitely misinterprets another idea of Language Writing. Fredman observes that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writers encouraged endless play with subtexts, which defines their poetic creation. But it is not entirely the case. A certain endeavour of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writers is, as Bruce Andrews puts it, the “*production of meaning and value*”. In his article ‘Writing Social Work & Political Practice’ he argues:

[...] the distinguishing quality of writing is *the incessant (& potential) production of meaning and value*. [...] Meaning isn’t just a surplus value to be eliminated – It comes out of a productive *practice*.⁹ [emphasis author]

It seems obvious from their writings that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writers want to play with Language – but the endeavour of poetic creativity of these Writers cannot be defined by this different play with words and texts. Rather for the reader, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writers work as the openers of “the ways of making meaning”– they are those workers of Language, who force the readers to take active participation in the production of meaning – they are the players, who want to open up different possibilities of interpretation by placing some words / letters in the blank space of a paper as a part of their play with Language.

The following poem by Clark Coolidge appropriately exemplifies this and here the readers are asked to fill the gaps and spaces:

erything
eral
stantly
ined
ards
cal
nize¹⁰

⁷ Stephen Fredman. *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983. 135.

⁸ Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, “Repossessing the Word”. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Carbondale Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. x.

⁹ Bruce Andrews. “Writing Social Work & Political Practice”. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Carbondale Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. 135.

¹⁰ As quoted by: Barrett Watten. “Total Syntax: The Work in the World (excerpt)”. *Electronic Poetry Centre*. 02 April 2006 <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/coolidge/watten.html>>.

The poem is interpreted by Edwin Morgan as “Everything / mineral / constantly / fined / towards / radical / recognize” – and he says, which definitely is the case, that in this poem “the first half of each line has been cut off”¹¹. To achieve the conception of the poet’s ‘Poetry’, a reader has to fill the first half of each line, but simultaneously the reader cannot be sure about the fact that the ‘meaning’ or ‘unmeaning’ he has ‘produced’ is the same with what the poet wanted to convey through his ‘poem’. This confusion about the productions of un/meaning(s) themselves produce the scope(s) of (mis)understanding(s), which challenges the traditional ways in which Energy is invested to produce single ‘authoritative’ meaning. The above quoted poem, for example, can be interpreted only as some fragmented letters and cannot at all be taken for poetical interpretation – but Coolidge probably tried to clear that confusion by using the first fragmented word as “erything”, which when pronounced is obviously and automatically interpreted by the reader’s intellectual capability as “everything” and then the reader starts interpreting other fragmented words which constitute the rest of the poem. The poem is a classic example of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry because an endless play with Language can be achieved through some these fragmented words. One may interpret these words as: “Everything / peripheral / constantly / lined / backwards / cyclical / colonize”. And by so interpreting the poem can again be interpreted to answer the obvious question: what do these words mean? This challenge clearly relates to the idea known as ‘The Death of the Author’, where meaning(s) become the interpreter’s propert(ies). Roland Barthes in ‘The Death of the Author’ claims:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘thological’ meaning (the ‘message of the Author-God’) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, non of them original, blend and clash ... Literature ... by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text, (and the world as text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is in the end to refuse God and his hypostasis – reason, science, law.¹²

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writings thus challenge the very notion of interpretation and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers’ predominant intention political. Ron Silliman clarifies this political intention by relating L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and the Marxist idea of “fetishism of commodity”:

(1)The stage of historical development determines the natural laws [...] of poetry; (2) the stage of historical development determines the natural laws of language; (3) the primary impact on language, and language arts, of the rise of capitalism has

¹¹ Edwin Morgan. *Language, Poetry, and Language Poetry*. The Kenneth Allott Lectures. 5. Liverpool, Liverpool Classical Monthly: 1990. 14.

¹² As quoted in: Christopher Butler. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. 23-24.

been in the area of reference and is directly related to the phenomena known as the commodity fetish.¹³

Thus post-war America with its Avant-garde aesthetics has been seen by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writers as a pure capitalistic society where everything is judged by its market value – even the very fact of reading is also a subject for commodification. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing negates the idea of commodity fetishism as Andrews and Bernstein proposes:

It is our sense that the project of poetry does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production.¹⁴

In L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing every sentence acts as an unit of meaning which challenges the capitalistic approach of commodification. By “active participation in” the *production* of that meaning the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writers propose a social engagement in the process of reading which many of the writers thought as one of the most neglected of all arts. By making un/meaning(s) the readers break down the commodity fetishism and enfold Language into an act of socio-political engagement. Language with its acceptable sign systems thus creates multiple texts and contexts and different meanings, unmeanings and unreadabilities take their forms. And it is what Bruce Andrews observes: “Meaning is not produced *by* the sign, but by the contexts we bring to the potentials of language [...]”.¹⁵

The application of this theory, which asks the writers to create not ‘text’ but “contexts”, has been made from a multi-dimensional perspectives which destroyed traditional form of poetry. Bruce Andrews proclaims: “Crystalline purity—or transparency—will not be found in words. That classical ideal is an illusion”¹⁶. To break through the classical ideal a geometrical shape of a poem was also a point of self-encouragement for the Language Poets as Silliman does in *Tjanting* (1981), which is based on Fibonacci number sequence (the number of sentence in each paragraph equals the number of sentences in the previous two paragraphs). The first five stanzas / paragraphs of the poem go on like this:

Not this.

What then?

I started over & over. Not this.

Last week I wrote “the muscles in my palm so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen.” What then? This morning my lip is blisterd.

¹³ Ron Silliman. “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World”. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Carbondale Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. 122.

¹⁴ Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews. “Repossessing the Word”. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Carbondale Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. x.

¹⁵ Andrews, “Text” 33.

¹⁶ As quoted by Paul Hoover: *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. Paul Hoover. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1994. 530-31.

Of about to within which. Again and again I began. The gray light of day fills the yellow room in a way wch is somber. Not this. Hot grease had spilld on the stove top.

The opening line “Not this” raises different sorts of questions, as the geometrical artificiality of the poem points inward (suggested by “this”), which simultaneously denies the linguistic projection of the poem because it is “Not this”. The Linguistic projection of a poem which turns back at the end of every line, has thus clearly been rejected by Silliman and by so doing he is rejecting the classical idea of writing verse. If seen etymologically the development of the word ‘verse’ shows that it is related with the idea of turning which begins another line¹⁷. Silliman’s poems negate the idea of writing verse because these are prose-poems, where turnings at the end of a line cannot be found. This idea has been applied more elaborately by Lyn Hejinian. In her essay *Rejection of Closure* Hejinian argues: “Repetition, and the rewriting that repetition becomes, make a perpetual beginning”. Rejecting the closedness of a poem’s line, and rewriting the repeated idea Hejinian opens the possibility of “perpetual beginning” of new meanings as she says: “The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is the form that opens it[0] [...]” Hejinian’s *My Life* (1987) literally opens up new possibilities of making meaning. She is probably interested in making ‘meanings’, rather than Andrews’s and Bernstein’s idea of making ‘meaning’. *My Life* shows how the selfhood, identity and subjectivity individually are products of Language and it is not how we produce meanings, but the playing of meanings produce a notion of selfhood which is always changing as Hejinian says: “I am a stranger to the little girl I was, and more--more strange.”

The poet whose name and work need to be mentioned in conclusion is Clark Coolidge. Coolidge is one among those very best poets of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school whose importance in the history of American poetry is characterized by his fascination with the idea of space and form. Coolidge not only makes experimentations with poetic forms like Silliman and Hejinian, but he also intrigues the readers to think on how space can be filled to create a concrete ‘form’. Coolidge however, does not consider the word ‘form’: “I don’t want to use the word *form*, I want to use the word *forms*. The word is plural always, you never have just one”¹⁸ [emphasis author]. This idea absolutely fits when we see his poems from a distance like in the poem *Space*, where one form (if there is any), definitely characterizes another form in the page-space:

miss ship
wren

sown

is

¹⁷ For more details see: *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Ed. John Simpson *et al.* 02 April 2006 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50276636?query_type=word&queryword=verse&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=xg9X-J9niDp-659&hilite=50276636> (para 1).

¹⁸ Hoover (Ed.) 369.

tow new
 a gray
 thin are under
 a blacker
 G road
 stand grayling powder none
 bout
 stiff coiler some
 trouble an
 pin pin pin pin pin pin
 go
 soap
 clutch¹⁹

Form can also be differently presented. In the poem 'Brill' (1970) (Figure 2) the form of the poem is being scattered and expanded continuously until it stops with the word "no" which can probably be interpreted as: this is the end, therefore *no* expansion of 'form' is needed. However, this simultaneously raises an inevitable question – where and how we are assuming the poem to 'begin'? There is no suggestion in Coolidge's 'Brill', by which we can assume that the poem begins from a particular word. The first and last words of the poem are in lower case and there is no fool-stop after the word "no", where we are presuming that the poem ends. All the scattered words placed in the last section of the poem problematise the very notion of interpretation. What does the poet mean by "Woolp-klo" in the middle of the poem? Why does the poem start with "emotional the"? What does the poet suggest by "past is root"? Is he by any chance suggesting that we should read the poem 'emotionally', throwing out all our previous notions of interpreting a poem? And by so doing is Coolidge asking us to cut all our "past" "root" of poetical interpretation? If so, is he therefore playing a game by placing monosyllabic words at the end of the poem? And if it is so how are we going to read those monosyllabic words: is it "sin / fun / sun" or "fun / six / not / hell / pall"? And finally how do all these relate to the title of the poem 'Brill', which means 'very good'. The title again suggests the use of the double letters, which has been carried throughout the poem by the use of the words "barren", "fees", "Seemed", "darkness", "root", "Woolp", "three" "speed", "stood", "Still", "hell" & "pall". The possibilities of observations go on and interpreting these poems means "dragging your naked body through a bed of hot coals and broken glass"²⁰

This observation of Stuart Klawan is probably that puzzled feeling with which any discussion on L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry can be concluded. The puzzle does not give scopes to critically find a definite 'meaning' through which the conundrum can be solved. The challenge always remains for critics and scholars and in this essay I have done nothing but tried to point out and discuss on some of these puzzling issues. I know that for the curious and serious readers a subsequent amount of curiosity still remains regarding commodity fetishism or the socio-political aspect of

¹⁹ This is a selection from the poem *Space* available at: <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/coolidge/space.html>>

²⁰ This was Stuart Klawan's view of reading Ron Silliman's poetry, quoted from: Morgan.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writings. But respecting the original intention for writing this article I have intentionally kept my discussion confined only to the ‘meaning’-related aspects of the political implication L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writings. It is undoubted that in the literary timeline L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing is perhaps the one and only initiative as of today, where the practitioners of a particular literary movement have directly challenged the very fact of reading. Questioning the readers’ interpretative abilities these writers have forced them to become puzzled like a spider suffocated with meaning(s). This suffocation, though it apparently seems deadly, ultimately enlivens the reader by involving him in an act of socio-political production. By producing the un/meaning(s) of poet’s poetry the reader finds himself in lonely position, where his own interpretations emerge as his dearest friends, who carry him through the rest of his journey towards a socio-political change by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.

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