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Language Writing and the Burden of Critique

I HATE SPEECH.
—Robert Grenier

Robert Grenier's famous statement has the distinction of being both the principal rallying cry and battle stance of a vigorous avant-garde movement and a deep well of complexity and strangeness. It first appears in a short text called "ON SPEECH," one of five essays by Grenier published in the first issue of *This* magazine (1971).[1] Fifteen years later, in his introduction to the groundbreaking anthology *In the American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry*, Ron Silliman would single out the phrase as the announcement of "a new moment in American writing" (xvii).[2] Since then, Silliman and others have returned to Grenier's statement again and again as the hallmark of a poetics founded on strategies of cultural and critical opposition.[3] From this grounding in oppositionalism and critique, language writing has been unified and canonized as a vanguard movement.

Looking back now at Silliman's introduction one is struck by how much qualification it took to stabilize Grenier's statement. This declaration, Silliman writes, "was not to be taken at face value" (xvii). In fact, "*This* 1 was obsessed with speech," in particular Grenier's own poem "Wintry" which reproduces "dialect variations in prosody and pronunciation of his native Minnesota" (xvii). And Grenier's "complex call for a projective verse that could . . . 'proclaim an abhorrence of 'speech''" was "*only one* axis of a shift within writing which became manifest with the publication of *This*" (xvii, emphasis added). Although the "particular contribution of *This*" was to reject "a speech-based poetics" and consciously raise "the issue of reference," "neither speech nor reference were ever, in any real sense, 'the enemy'" (xviii). The use of "I HATE SPEECH" as a literary historical marker also asks

us to disregard Grenier's own background as a writer (in addition to being a vanguard poet, he was also a former student of Robert Lowell, a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the author of a Harvard honors thesis on the prosody of William Carlos Williams), his relationship to Larry Eigner (whose difficulty with speech profoundly impacted Grenier), the thrust of his essay (to contemplate not just a break with literary tradition but also "the way forward from Williams"), and the performative and rhetorical qualities of the statement itself (the fact that the very resonance of the statement—not to mention that the words are shouted in capital letters—complicates its apparent univocality).

The completeness with which totalizing uses of Grenier's statement have eclipsed the tensions within it is striking and revealing: striking for the rhetorical and critical force generated and for the amount of qualification required to carry it off and revealing for the sense it yields of how deeply the phrase has been leveraged to critical ends. As critique, language writing takes up a powerful and stable position anchored by an outspoken and highly distinctive point of view. From this standpoint, language writers produced statements that were incisive and compelling and relentless in their efforts to expose the false idols of speaking subjects and linguistic referents and debunk the "myth of speech." At the same time, critique is much more than just a vehicle for demystifying the formal conventions of realism and confessionalism. It is also the means by which language writing radicalizes itself as a two-headed juggernaut: a poetic and a critical avant-garde. As Jeff Derksen notes, "the valorization of Grenier's statement as the moment of origination . . . determines the language writers as an historical avant-garde, gaining its originality in splitting from the poetics of the previous avant-garde, the New American Poetry" (46). In addition to functioning as a temporal great divide, Grenier's phrase establishes the other great divide that sustains language writing's oppositionalism: the distinction between speech and writing. The critique of speech in turn puts language writing into obvious alignment with poststructuralism. Derrida's identification of the cultural logic of humanism with the history of phonocentrism gives the language writers' critique of speech-based poetics a much larger purchase, allowing a highly localized critique of poetics to annex an encompassing critique of metaphysics and the humanist subject. The final pillar of language writing's critical poetics was the adaptation of Marx's theory of the commodity fetish to characterize linguistic reference as an after-effect of capitalism. Again, Silliman provides the most forceful articulation:

"Under the sway of the commodity fetish, language itself appears to become transparent, a mere vessel for the transfer of ostensibly autonomous referents" ("Disappearance" 11). This act of doubly dichotomizing the cultural field structures language writing's claims to vanguard status, agonistically and hyperbolically inscribing "speech" and "speech-based poetics" as formally homologous to humanism and capitalism.

I single out critique to show how much it has done to structure and launch discourse about language writing, but also to open it up for analysis and to question it. There is no doubt that the turn to critique as a standpoint for poetics accomplished a great deal for language writing in terms of unifying and radicalizing it as a movement. My argument in this essay is that it is also responsible for introducing a culturally reductive set of discriminations into conversations about poetics. This is because the refinements required to make poetics do critical work result in major distortions elsewhere. For example, in seeking an affirmation of critique based in a rejection of speech, supporters of language writing effect common cause with the most powerful critical vanguard of the 1970s and 1980s, but also commit to an unconvincing cultural narrative predicated on the supposed transparency and metaphysicality of speech. In generalizing speech as a cipher for metaphysics and speech-based poetics, language writing mounts a vigorous and influential critique of poetic norms, but loses track of speech as a medium and the movement's own complex investments in the materiality of opaque and fragmented speech. In splitting the cultural field into ideological positions defined by speech and writing, language writing gains critical currency, but loses the ability to conceptualize the convergence of speech and writing as media. The critical and canonizing work Grenier's phrase performs for language writing therefore needs to be understood in relation to the set of dubious cultural judgments it introduces into conversations about poetics.

Analyzing the status of critique in language writing discourse presents certain difficulties. The ubiquity of critique as the gold standard of theoretical inquiry and interrogation renders it oddly invisible, and the self-validating force of its use can make it seem impregnable. Critique is something of a "black box" in Bruno Latour's sense of the term: a way of speaking and a set of procedures "made invisible by its own success" (*Pandora's Hope* 304). As the opposite of dogma and the foundation since Kant for thinking as a systematic, rigorous enterprise, critique doesn't attract doubt; its job is to project doubt onto other things.[4] The work of critique, like the scientific and technical devices Latour describes in *Pandora's Hope*, therefore constitutes a

self-validating mechanics: "When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity" (304).

The status of critique as both ubiquitous and seemingly impregnable can make its very use culturally validating, and what I will call this "validation effect" can outperform its ostensible function as a mode of inquiry and interrogation. I believe Silliman's efforts to customize Grenier's phrase as a univocal critical statement in the face of contradictory evidence should be read in this way—not as a willful misrepresentation, but as a case of strategic misprision. In its need to mark an absolute separation between the emergent "new moment in American writing" and everything else, it misconstrues equally the Pound/Williams tradition, Black Mountain, and the New American Poetry. This is allowed to happen because the critical narrative thus constructed is ultimately pitched, not as an interrogation of speech-based poetics, but as a validation of language writing.[5] Alan Golding's assessment of the politics of language writing, "as addressed to the canon-making institutions of contemporary poetry" is a valuable insight here (151).[6] The thrust of Silliman's anthology was to counteract the cultural invisibility of vanguard poetry and to intervene in canon-making discussions. The case Silliman presents for language writing's cultural value is its critical standpoint. In the context of a literary field constructed as an arena, language writing proves itself by standing in critical opposition to the manifest complicity of earlier schools of poetry with uncritical ideas. In this way, language writing's oppositionalism is offered as proof of its exceptionalism.

This method of self-validation via critical separation and negation proved remarkably successful. Indeed, Silliman has been so effective in addressing the canon-making institutions of American poetry that he has become one himself. Key to the authority of his work is the self-validating force of its criticality and oppositionalism. As Latour would say, to be critical is to be right![7] Moreover, the theoretical grounding of Silliman's critical writing opens up a space where poets can convene with critics to champion vanguard poetics as an agonistic enterprise bent on critical and cultural emancipation. In this light Golding sees language writing as "the best hope for breaking down the impasse between poetry and theory that has led to the marginalization of poetry within the academy and that is pushing poetry itself toward the status of a minor genre" (148).

In the same way that Silliman's commentary should be understood as a strategic misprision, Grenier's "abhorrence of speech" obviously needs to be

(and has been) understood tactically as a disturbance "in the field." As Pierre Bourdieu notes, "What happens in the field is more and more linked to a specific history of the field, and hence it becomes more and more difficult to deduce it directly from the state of the social world at the moment under consideration" (qtd. in Ngai 954). Grenier's statement is "not to be taken at face value" because its field of application is not the social world, but rather the history of poetics. Which is to say that Grenier invokes speech, not as a thing, but as a critical object. The speech Grenier hates is the ossified "reiteration of the past dragged on in formal habit," an affectation and imitation of the thing itself, "the various vehicle that American speech is" ("ON SPEECH"). The speech Grenier's followers hate is a similar, though constantly shimmering, image of the same spectre: the expressive voice of personal lyricism. But these acts of curtailment also have important consequences. In order for it to perform critical and canonizing work for language writing, Grenier's statement must be lifted from its complex grounding in social circumstance and rhetoric and be put into a critical narrative. The result is a view that separates speech and writing and uses that distinction to structure the literary field as an exaggerated conflict between stereotyped positions. In other words, a cultural melodrama. That is the critical view. The historical view presents us with a different, more nuanced, and far more compelling story.

In his introduction to *The Collected Poems of Larry Eigner* (2010), Grenier describes the visit he made in January 1971 to Eigner's home in Swampscott, Massachusetts, just as the first issue of *This* magazine was being assembled.

> I was a creepy little magazine editor trying to crawl in there and get a poem (for nothing!) for my (unpublished) 'periodical' *this* [sic]—from the author of *From The Sustaining Air, On My Eyes* and *Another Time In Fragments*—and Larry welcomed me, warmly and openly. (This was his opportunity to *talk...*) His diminutive mother, Bessie, brought out a plate of snacks, and I was introduced to his father, Israel, who receded into the background of the house.
>
> Because I couldn't understand *At All* what he was saying—in his <u>barrage</u> <u>of</u> (<u>palsied</u>) <u>speech</u> [sic]—he had not had 'opportunity to converse' for so long!—in my *panic* (after all, I knew something of his work and was currently teaching his poems in my Modern Poetry class at Tufts), I asked Larry to read aloud several poems which I 'knew in the book'—and thereby began the process of learning to hear what he was saying (because I could *see it on the page*, as he spoke). (n. pag.)

Here, the opacity of Eigner's speech prompts a panicked response in Grenier that yields an extraordinary moment of connection. Not just between the two poets who would become lifelong friends, but also between speech and

writing. Picking up the book Grenier learns how to hear and understand because he could "*see it on the page*, as [Eigner] spoke."

> I came out of there (after c. 2 1/2 hours, of that first interview) *utterly exhausted*—from the 'language problem' and trying to keep up with Larry's relentless ('monologue') energy and 'sidewise'/associational thinking. Afterward, I just <u>sat</u> <u>in</u> <u>my</u> <u>car</u> (the green Jeep, it would have been), before gathering myself to drive home to Lanesville, where Emily, Amy and I lived then.
>
> It was immediately clear to me that Larry Eigner was a very considerable person, whose existence shone forth from him (how else say it?)—and who was one with a '*métier*' (just like, differently, W. C. Williams—<u>writing</u>—despite Stein's spiteful retort), a *measure*—a 'homegrown/American' *use of his typewriter* ! (n. pag.)

This highly charged encounter with the embodied prosody of Eigner's speech coupled with the text of his poetry and his use of the typewriter presents a very different story than the usual narrative about the formation of language poetry as a critical site. Here is an example of speech that is opaque rather than transparent, which conceals the speaker as much as it reveals him, and which effectuates itself in an energetic hybrid with writing. This critical moment in the formation of language writing here defies all the critical distinctions that would later come to speak for it.

In the critical narrative that frames language writing, ethos is treated as highly suspect for its suggestion of a connection between language and the speaker, as if such a connection always and automatically constituted an appeal to the metaphysics of presence, and as if such an appeal was always and automatically a symptom of critical blindness and conceptual weakness.[8] But in Grenier's story the complex personhood, speech, presence, and ethos of Eigner is powerfully invoked as a circumstance of literary history.

> That very *presence* of the eyes—and the intelligence and sympathy and 'openness of understanding' in them—was what was initially absolutely engaging to me, when I first walked up to the door . . . (Larry's workspace was the front porch)—this was determinative. (n. pag.)

Grenier's appeal to the presence and personhood of Eigner is continuous with his filiations for Williams' prosody and the claims of projective verse, and deserves to be considered in relation to other pointed statements Grenier has made that signal his ongoing commitment to prosody as a dimension of poetics and his indifference to critique: "Not about 'knowledge', but RHYTHMS of what's being said!" (*Farming the Words* n.pag.). But Silliman's repeated attempts to radicalize Grenier's statement as a "carefully constructed attempt to transform the project of poetry" ("Dysfunction" 182) and *This* 1 as "a calculated revolutionary sequence" (188) take things in a very different direction.

Other statements by Grenier suggest an unwillingness to endorse the critical narrative put together by Silliman and others. In the following exchange from *Hills* 6/7 (1980) about the status of voice and persona in William Stafford's poem "Traveling Through the Dark," Grenier declines to trumpet the party line.

> [*Bob Perelman:*] ["Traveling Through the Dark"] is all persona in the worst sense. It's the persona of the real life self speaking normally. . . .
>
> [T]his is a "voice" poem. William Stafford has "found his voice." It's all realistic, but all it leads up to is the pathetic fallacy of "I could hear the wilderness listen." A typical neo-academic dirge for nature. The poet is firmly in the driver's seat, "I could hear the wilderness," and firmly in control of all the meaning, "I thought hard for us all."
> . . . .
> [T]he I is in a privileged position, unaffected by the words.
>
> *Robert Grenier: I* don't think it's fair to dump on the emotional self as commodity. What is there of interest that draws people to that poem?
>
> *Perelman:* The Stafford poem? I don't know. It's a question of how people read and the circuits that have been opened in readers' minds. The way poetry is being taught now there's less sense of possibility and the mass of people who do read poetry, which isn't very big, have read poems like this, and it's a reassuring, soothing sense of self.
>
> *Grenier:* That you don't often have in your daily life.
>
> *Perelman:* Yes.
>
> *Grenier:* And that you can project yourself onto and identify with as a kind of locus of sensibility that you'd like to be possessed of, at least while reading the page, to give the world a center of feeling it might not have in the flux of shifting phenomena. . . .
>
> *Silliman:* . . . all the language is subservient to this umbrella structure, which only surfaces in the poem at the word *I.* What makes the poem work is that same sense of agreement you get in bad didactic writing, whether it's talking about the individualized subjective I or the People or Logos. We've seen a lot of umbrella terms used badly in poetry. And Stafford simply represents one form of that, where all the language dissolves as you're reading it. When you hear language being used "poetically," like the cat purring, it comes across in a really smarmy way. (qtd. in Perelman et al. n. pag.)

In this example, the revolutionary reading of form that validates language writing is recycled as prima facie evidence of Stafford's standing as a voice-hugger. Grenier's uncritical interest in how Stafford's poem might function within a practical habitus of reading and sensibility is so far out of line with the other speakers that they struggle to formulate a response to it.

In the context of language writing doctrine we should take Perelman and Silliman's assessments as enlightened and critical and Grenier's position as hopelessly naïve, but the degree of generalization and critical overstatement in Perelman and Silliman's position (note the frequency of the word "all") and the goodwill and openness of Grenier's response make that difficult to do. Instead, we're more apt to notice how quickly the revolutionary reading of form yielded its own highly conventionalized way of talking about poetry and how this free fall from critique to boilerplate criticism coincides with the creation of a proscriptive formalist imaginary that legislates for judgment in conversations about poetics.

Even though language poetry's critique of speech is meant as an indictment of personal lyricism and not "the various vehicle that American speech is"—an indictment, that is, of speech the critical object rather than speech the thing—it nonetheless progresses into a disavowal of prosody itself, leading Douglas Messerli to conclude that "a harmful disjuncture between prosody and American poetry has occurred" (n. pag.). As speech the critical object starts to engulf speech the thing, the critical discussion arrives at a generalized condemnation of prosody and intonation:

> As the speech-based poetics of the mid-century has given way, more and more, to the foregrounding of the materiality of the written sign itself, a prosody based on intonational contours has become increasingly problematic. The emphasis on the moment of enunciation (at best variable and transitory) now seems a questionable procedure, whether for the poet or the reader. For such "momentary" or "instantaneous" rhythm suggests that there is first an experience, something lived and felt *out there*, and then only then and secondarily its verbal rendering. But this doctrine goes counter to everything poststructuralist theory has taught us: if writing is regarded, not as the linear representation of a prior "full" or "originary" speech, but as what Derrida calls a "sequence of differences," a sequence in which the phonemic, graphemic, and ideographic elements of language are brought into play, then we may expect to find a poetic composition that is neither conventionally metrical on the one hand, nor breath-determined or "intonational" on the other. (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 137-38)

One purpose of poststructuralist critique is to destabilize binary oppositions, but as we can see from the above statement, those oppositions have a way of reasserting themselves. In the case of deconstruction it is Derrida himself who first dismantles but then rebuilds the binary opposition between speech and writing. For Derrida, the logic of *différance* dictates that all signifiers are prey to the difference and deference that "always already" affects signification such that the "fallen secondarity" that seemed to characterize writing alone is a property of all language, speech included.[9] Writing thus inhabits speech

and thereby "*comprehends* language" (*Of Grammatology* 7). But in choosing to name the hybrid object that results from this analysis *writing* (*écriture*) and by choosing to validate it in opposition to *speech*, Derrida reproduces the binary logic he had so adeptly displaced. The interrogation poststructuralist critique performs on the history of Western metaphysics yields a new critical object, but the process of validating the results of this analysis reinscribes the binary.

As with Silliman's use of Grenier's phrase we can see the two functions of critique—interrogation and validation—interfering with one another. As a method for interrogating ideas, critique is a very powerful tool, but as a method for validating positions it often seeks shelter in dubious narrativizing. The strong part of Derrida's argument is its interrogation of the idealist logic within the history of metaphysics that valorizes the supposed ontological priority of speech over writing. Certainly, Derrida's readings of Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, and Lévi-Strauss are among the very best examples of critique as a mode of interrogation that one could mention. But how do we explain Derrida's over-reaching attempt to validate writing by casting it as the protagonist in a captivity narrative? Derridean grammatology asks us to understand speech as the domineering figure in a very long tradition that subordinates writing as a mere supplement to inner audition, an idea which Derrida overstates to the point of absurdity: "The system of 'hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak' through the phonic substance . . . has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch," he writes (*Of Grammatology* 7-8). This fullness of speech is in turn totalized via alignment with "all the metaphysical determinations of truth" (10), or the logos. And "Within this logos," Derrida states, "the original and essential link to the phone has never been broken" (11). So convinced is Derrida of this indissoluble link between voice and the logos that he repeats it several more times in the succeeding paragraphs.

> The voice . . . has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity to the mind. (11)
> In every case, the voice is closest to the signified. (11)
> Within the heritage of that logocentrism that is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning. (11-12)
> Hegel demonstrates very clearly the strange privileging of sound in idealization. (12)

But in fact the link between speech and logos had been broken. As Friedrich Kittler notes, "Hegel had referred to 'the *sound*' as 'a disappearing of being in the act of being,' subsequently celebrating it as a 'saturated expression of the manifestation of inwardness.' What is impossible to store could not be

manipulated. Ridding itself of its materiality or clothes, it disappeared and presented inwardness as a seal of authenticity" (36). The construction of sound as an emblem of inwardness and unmediated self-presence supposes a pre-Edisonian world in which sounds are always ephemeral, always disappearing in the act of becoming, always indicative of the presence of the subject to itself. With the invention of recording technology, sound ceased to be necessarily ephemeral. It could be exteriorized and stored and manipulated. Sound recording disrupts "the absolute proximity of voice and being," and this dissociation of sound from being breaks the metaphysical contract. In Hegel's day, phonocentrism and logocentrism were the same thing—speech always coincided with self-presence—but after Edison speech and presence are no longer indissolubly linked. The absolute inwardness of the phone that Derrida inscribes as a condition of phonologocentrism does not apply in a post-Edisonian world.[10]

And yet, the rhetorical and self-validating force of Derrida's presentation of this story is so great that his conflation of phonocentrism and logocentrism is brought into literary critical conversations unchallenged. The subsequent construction of speech and voice in language writing discourse as constituting an automatic appeal to presence reproduces the flaw in Derrida's argument. In choosing to understand speech as irredeemably bound up with appeals to transparency and self-presence—as a medium that doesn't mediate—language writing loses its ability to formulate speech and personhood as social facts and cultural material. More than that, the use of critique to problematize speech reinscribes a Cartesian dualism that would seek to distinguish between a form of ersatz mind exemplified by textuality/signification/analysis and embodiment. As Barrett Watten puts it,

> My point in writing on Ginsberg and the 60s has been that Language poetics begins right there, with the dissociation of signification from embodiment. Why was that necessary or good? Because the insistence on embodied presence seemed to imply an authority in the poet, not in the poet's diagnosis of or response to the war. The analysis of the war that produced its rejection finally boils down to an embodied response, but this did not necessarily communicate an analysis. And we need now to communicate our analysis, not only register our rejection of the war. ("War = Language")

Watten's desire to purify analysis of the taint of embodiment mirrors Silliman's belief in the corrupting status of voice and ethos in performance where the presence of the poet on stage is held up as a distraction from the "text *as text*" ("*Who Speaks*"), and the same discrimination features in Silliman's 1986 work *The Chinese Notebook*, to which I turn now.

The Chinese Notebook is a remarkable and provocative work and perhaps the most sustained and considered attempt to flesh out the thinking behind language writing's critique of speech and its corresponding affirmation of the textual condition as a cultural ground, so I will devote some time to it.

Silliman presents the text as a logical positivist discourse on language in the mode of Ludwig Wittgenstein's early philosophy. In place of lines we have a series of 223 numbered propositions and questions. The very occasional eruptions of sound play are spoofs: of alliteration ("Wayward we weigh words" [149]), rhyme ("The chair in the air is covered with hair" [149]), and pun ("*sad is faction*" [165] and "Alimentary, my dear Watson" [173]). The only recurrent image in the poem is, tellingly, a non-image: air. The poem represents Silliman's most complete attempt at a work of pure logopoeia. In Ezra Pound's parlance: "the dance of the intelligence among words and ideas." Whereas Wittgenstein claimed that "One should really only do philosophy as poetry" ["*Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten*"], Silliman is testing out the notion that it is possible to do poetry in the mode of philosophy, making use of propositions, interrogations, and thought experiments to examine the poem's relation to language, truth, subjectivity, and the world.

Is *The Chinese Notebook* a parody? Some aspects of Silliman's investigation of linguistic reference might suggest so. In section 29, Silliman writes, "29. Mallard, drake—if the words change, does the bird remain?" (152). And yet, the will among language writers to question and politicize the referential function of language is a pillar of their critical standpoint, one that finds critical power and poetic capital in the act of corrupting the epistemologies of capitalism and humanism. For the language writers the question of linguistic reference couldn't be more important. As Watten has shown, a poetics of disabled, or complicated, or vanishing reference can work as a method for exposing the ideological structures at work in the cultures of capitalist economies: "*Language* for us was a process of ideological unmasking, an unlinking of interests from chronic ideas, reified frames" ("Turn to Language"). Silliman, in his essays from the 70s, often posits the same relation between form and politics:

> What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive, and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism," the illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the function of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality. ("Disappearance" 10)

Like Watten, Silliman finds critical force in this coupling of Marxist philosophy and the poststructuralist reading of Saussurean linguistics. The position Silliman and Watten formulate isolates reference as a strategic point of theoretical leverage, the logic being that if capitalist ideology works by oversimplifying reference, passing off highly contrived representations as transparent and natural, then it is possible to expose and critique the procedures of capitalist culture by problematizing reference. Language writing lays claim to an active politics when it intervenes to expose reference as a fraught process laden with interests and instabilities.

The strength *and the weakness* of this position is its extreme formalism. Reference is a precise and powerful locus of linguistic activity and a highly charged point of transfer in the capitalist language game, but attempts to extrapolate from it to the larger sphere of politics lack a material basis. Several language writers, Silliman and Watten especially, capitalize on the strength of the Marxist formalist model and compensate for its weakness by linking their formalist claims to material histories. Silliman, for instance, endows a critical/formalist poetics with material coordinates by historicizing it in terms of the history of communications media. The result is a powerful interdisciplinary heuristic that unites key aspects of media history and literary studies long before such a thing became academically common. At the same time, Silliman's use of this strategy is curiously partial, as we will see.

Silliman's binding of formalist propositions to the history and materialities of communication media begins, of course, with the title of the poem itself, which refers to the medium on which the text was composed. Silliman writes,

> 18. I chose a Chinese notebook, its thin pages not to be cut, its six red line columns which I turned 90°, the way they are closed by curves at the top and bottom, to see how it would alter the writing. Is it flatter, more airy? The words, as I write them, are larger, cover more surface on this two dimensional picture plane. Shall I, therefore, turn toward shorter terms—impact of page on vocabulary? (*The Chinese Notebook* 151)

Here Silliman demonstrates how the form and format of the notebook bring the visual materiality of words into the composition process and influence his choice of diction.

Other propositions sprinkled throughout the work invoke comparable ideas.

> 6. I wrote this sentence with a ballpoint pen. If I had used another, would it have been a different sentence? (149)

What Silliman writes in proposition 206 suggests that the answer is yes.

> 206. A paper which did not absorb fluids well, a pencil that was blunt or wrote

only faintly. These would determine the form of the work. Now, when I set out on a piece, choice of instrument and recorder (notebook, typing paper, etc.) are major concerns. I am apt to buy specific pens for specific pieces. (175)

For Silliman, the materialities of communication are ontic rather than descriptive categories:

21. Poem in a notebook, manuscript, magazine, book, reprinted in an anthology. Scripts and contexts differ. How could it be the same poem? (151)

Proposition 175 elaborates the notion just expressed:

175. A poem written in pen could never have been written in pencil. (171)

And so, according to Silliman, it is not language that is ontologically prior to the act of composition but rather the instrument used to wield language.

24. If the pen won't work, the words won't form. The meanings are not manifested. (151)

According to Silliman, media play a constitutive role in poetics. Far from being a supplement that extends poetry from the private into the public sphere, the materialities of communication become the ontological condition of poetry, contributing ordering, framing, and selecting functions to the composition process. By furnishing the technical tools by which artists make and distribute their work, media comprise the material substratum of literary culture. By situating poetry and poetics within media ecology Silliman reframes our understanding of poesis in materialist terms. Having come to media through Marxism and its signature commands to historicize and contextualize, Silliman discovers a ready method for endowing a formalist poetics with a materialist orientation.

But this description accounts for only one set of claims Silliman makes about media in *The Chinese Notebook*. From Silliman's materializing gloss on writing instruments we run headlong into his very different take on speech. The shift is marked in terms of both the content and tone of the propositions. From Wittgenstein, Silliman adapts not just the form of the proposition and its logical procedures but also the sober, uninflected voice of logical positivist discourse—except in sections where he ponders what role speech might have in contemporary poetics. There, Silliman's tone is apt to turn sardonic—"8. This is not speech. I wrote it" (149)—and even scornful—"22. The page intended to score speech. What an elaborate fiction that seems!" (151). At moments like these Silliman can't resist sprinkling some intonational spice on his propositions. In a work largely predicated on the suppression of voice, these eruptions of tone stand out and deserve careful consideration.

Clearly, the ontological status Silliman grants to writing instruments is not extended to the voice. Using quotation marks for intonational effect, Silliman writes in proposition 88: "That writing was 'speech' 'scored.' A generation caught in such mixed metaphor (denying the metaphor) as that. That elaboration of technical components of the poem carried the force of prophecy" (160). Silliman's commitment to critique as a standpoint for poetics and his fidelity to the critical binary that marks an absolute separation between speech and writing dictates that he must denigrate writing-speech hybridity as a mere "metaphor." The critical imagination of a recomposed formal hierarchy that elevates the radical artifice of writing over the ostensibly naïve projections of speech fuels Silliman's contempt for the voice. The result is some unchecked slippage from a critique of the *ideology* of speech and "speech-based poetics" to renunciations of speech *tout court* as medium and source material for poetry.

This happens in *The Chinese Notebook* when Silliman ascribes a purely referential and expressive function to speech. "Speech only tells you the speaker" (154), he writes in proposition 41, adding later (in proposition 137):

> 137. The concept that the poem "expresses" the poet, vocally or otherwise, is at one with the whole body of thought identified as Capitalist Imperialism. (166)

In a curious twist, speech becomes the organ of Capitalist Imperialism because it connects language to the expressive subject via reference. Whereas Silliman's analysis of writing instruments foregrounds their materiality, his analysis of speech presupposes a purely virtual phenomenon, pre-programmed by the history of metaphysics and capitalism to perform an expressive, referential function. Speech, as represented in the formalist logics of Derrida and Silliman, is the medium that doesn't mediate, that eclipses its mediality in a burst of apodictic insight.

In materialist terms, the connection Silliman posits between speech and reference doesn't hold because speech, every bit as much as writing, is host to play, irony, semiotic slippage, and all manner of fugitive and opaque utterance. The connection between speech and the expressive subject is equally false in its understanding of the speaking subject as metaphysical automaton, and the idea that an emphasis on speech as a medium for poetry always signals an investment in the metaphysics of presence ignores the strong connection between a vanguard sensibility and the use of speech as source material in writers like Gertrude Stein, William S. Burroughs, and Kenneth Goldsmith. What is more, the conflation of phonocentrism

and logocentrism blocks an awareness of the ways that writers like Stein, Burroughs, and Goldsmith use speech precisely to imagine post-humanist subjectivities mediated and mutated by ideology and technology.

The efforts on the part of several language writers to fashion a poetics that incorporated critique in large part explains the attraction of the formalist logic of textuality. But the resultant construction of a formal hierarchy that pits the enlightened artifice of the text against the naïve projections of speech furnishes a distorted critical imagination of the literary field and forecloses a practical understanding of the many ways that new media condition speech and remove it from the idealist sphere of subjective inwardness. Despite the aggressive renunciations of it that have distinguished vanguard poetics in critical conversations, speech, just as much as writing, has "a radical material exteriority" (Hansen 126) that comes to bear in vanguard poetics. Originating as it does in a critique of Husserlian phenomenology, poststructuralist analysis fails to take into account the role of media in exteriorizing and thereby estranging speech from the subject.

In a text called "Wild Form" Silliman writes that "prosody and P.O.V. beget one another" implying, alongside Perloff and others, that prosody and melos only ever conjure the dummy subject of humanism and capitalism and vice versa. In its studious avoidance of intonation and its adoption of a rigorous propositional format *The Chinese Notebook* strives to avoid this fate. As a corrective, Silliman, like Watten, tries to disengage signification from embodiment by substituting logos for prosody and melos, only to have prosody and melos rear their ugly heads. In the end, prosody and point of view both return to haunt Silliman's text at precisely those moments when he would like to single them out for their supposed a-criticality.

The critical construction of "speech" as a metaphysical myth helps to validate language writing in the same way that it helps to validate Derridean grammatology. But at what cost? In both cases, the crisis and burden of the critical stance is its inability to formulate speech-writing hybridity, rendering inaccessible the material prosody of opaque and fragmented speech as a possible vector of radical textuality. Having purified speech and writing as adversarial positions in a debate about metaphysics and humanism, language writing and poststructuralism erect a great divide where precisely the opposite is needed. In place of a poetics that puts speech and writing into opposition, language writing would be better served by a descriptive poetics that attempts to formulate the purposely unresolved tension between ethos and signification, speech and writing, that is a source of so much energy in

contemporary poetics. If critique forces language writing into an ill-advised renunciation of hybridity, it remains to ask, What is the opposite of critique? Perhaps it is not dogma and naïveté after all, but rather a will toward assemblage and combination, what Latour has called "compositionalism," or if you will, poetics.

NOTES

1 The complete paragraph reads: "Why not exaggerate, as Williams did, for our time proclaim an abhorrence of 'speech' designed as was his castigation of 'the sonnet' to rid us, as creators of the world, from reiteration of the past dragged in on formal habit. I HATE SPEECH" (n. pag.). The first three annual issues of *This* (1971-82) were edited by Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten and the remaining nine by Watten. A complete index can be found at ECLIPSE: http://english.utah.edu/eclipse/projects/THIS/this.html.

2 Eleana Kim writes: "this volume [*In the American Tree*] consecrates what was until then arguably more of a tendency than a movement as such, and it registers Silliman's undeniable editorial power in presenting the public face of this movement" ("Language Poetry").

3 Few descriptions of language writing fail to discuss Grenier's statement as a founding moment. See Reinfeld (1); Derksen; and Perelman (ch. 3) for examples. Silliman returned to Grenier's statement in "The Dysfunction of Criticism" (1998) for further analysis.

4 It should be noted that the de Man affair initiated a period of reflection on critique as a method. Jean-Luc Nancy's "Our History" and Rodolphe Gasche's *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man* are important in that discussion. Derrida offers a sustained examination of critique in *Spectres of Marx* (ch. 2). See Butler for a more recent examination of the status of critique in the context of disciplinarity.

5 Silliman himself has expressed astonishment "at the lack of historic and social perspective" that his own reading of Grenier's phrase entailed. "It reduces or abolishes dozens, if not hundreds (if not thousands) of alternative literary traditions that are entirely legitimate and necessary for their respective audiences. It is seemingly ignorant of the social forces beyond the horizon of the text" ("Dysfunction" 181-82).

6 Jeff Derksen's reading differs: "Language writing did not aim exclusively at academic reception and canon revision, but rather at the transformation of a social subject through language and through a model of productive consumption for reading" (42).

7 For an elaboration of this position see Latour.

8 For discussions of ethos as problematic, see Middleton; Davidson; and Silliman ("*Who Speaks*").

9 "The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they *enter the game*" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 7).

10 Kenneth Goldsmith's work stands as an excellent example of the dissociation of speech and self-presence. In works like *Soliloquy* and *Fidget*, Goldsmith singles out speech as cultural material, not because it proffers privileged access to subjective inwardness or because the self-citational moves of the speaking subject vouchsafe the presence of that subject to itself, but because it does exactly the opposite. Recorded speech discloses a form of language that is fragmentary, disjunctive, and radically exterior to the subject. "*Soliloquy* presents speech at its most raw, its most brutal and in its most gorgeously disjunctive

form," Goldsmith says, before adding, "The entire activity [of creating *Soliloquy*] was humiliating and humbling, seeing how little of 'value' I actually speak over the course of a typical week. How unprofound my life and my mind is; how petty, greedy, and nasty I am in normal speech. It's absolutely horrifying" (qtd. in Perloff, "A Conversation").

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