Imagining Community:
Individual Influence and Group Cohesion in American Avant-Garde Poetry and Poetics

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature

Chapel Hill
2008

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ABSTRACT

Tessa Joseph Nicholas: Imagining Community:
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(Under the direction of William Harmon)

This project explores the efforts of American self-consciously avant-garde poets to develop an intellectual and pedagogical community for the 20th century experimental poet, focusing on the patterns of influence and repetition that have defined the practice and analysis of American avant-garde poetry and poetics since modernism. It argues that avant-garde texts are always, at least in part, produced in conscious conjunction with the production of their own specialized community of readers. Thus, the designation “avant-garde” is treated as an indicator of a set of social and pedagogical aims more than as the expression of an objective literary new. To this end, it traces the development of a number of modernist and avant-garde anthologies and periodicals devoted to “avant-garde” or “experimental” poetry and poetics.

Ezra Pound’s work with Poetry magazine and in the development of anthologies of new poetry, as well as his later poetic style; William Carlos Williams’ development of the colloquial poetic voice; and Gertrude Stein’s hybrid prose are taken as models for later generations of American poets working in the avant-garde tradition, such as the Language writers, the new generation of Southern poets as expressed in Bill Lavender’s anthology Another South, digital
poetries, and North Carolina’s Lucifer Poetics Group and its attendant listserv.
Digital poetries and listservs, in particular, are treated as the culmination of the avant-garde project, combining and expressing aspects of poetry, prose, criticism, the archive, local identity, and community.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the director of my dissertation, William Harmon, for patience and conversation, and for reminding me again and again that “avant-garde” never means “new.” Thanks also to the other members of my committee, Tyler Curtain, Jane Thrailkill, Linda Wagner-Martin, and Todd Taylor, for their support and flexibility. Thanks especially to Todd, whose encouragement and plain talk about professional development kept me moving during the two years in which I worked as his graduate assistant. Thanks to my husband, George Nicholas, for holding the baby while I made my final revisions to this dissertation. Thanks to the members of the Lucifer poetics listserv and community for their inspiration and energy.

And finally, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Deborah Tall, my former undergraduate advisor, who passed away in 2006. Deborah was the most generous and exacting of teachers and editors, as well as a truly surprising and extraordinary poet. All the best of my creative and academic work, as well as so many others’, is due to her gentle influence.
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INTRODUCTION: “NEW” AMERICAN POETRIES

The poet Robert Duncan’s early suspicion of, and distaste for, Donald Allen’s seminal anthology of experimental poetry and poetics *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, is well-known; the story’s been circulated widely among friends and colleagues, and chronicled in histories such as Alan Golding’s useful article of 1998, “The New American Poetry Revisited, Again.” The appeal of the story can be found in Duncan’s suspicion of the applicability of anthologizing techniques to avant-garde poetries, as well as of his own inclusion in such a project, his protectiveness of what Golding calls “Duncan’s sense of himself as a coterie poet (presumably with a coterie audience)” (Golding 189). After expressing an initial interest in the project, Duncan backed out, citing his mistrust of Allen as an editor, Allen’s open appeals to Duncan’s vanity, and what Duncan saw as the canonizing spirit of the project in general.

However, this early resistance, followed by Duncan’s later open support of and integral participation in the project, demonstrates the foundational joys and difficulties of any editor or publisher of a literary collection, particularly one devoted to promotion and exploration of the “new,” to experimentation and innovation. Duncan’s concern that the anthology would become a dry catalogue, or worse, a parade or zoo, of poets, was replaced by a respect for Allen’s seriousness and “scholarly” methods (Golding points out that for Duncan,
“scholarly” and “academic” were vastly different categories; we shall return to this distinction) and the historical and regional organization of the project (Golding 189-90).

The New American Poetry was, by the standards of avant-garde or experimental poetry, a major success. It was published in 1960 and ultimately performed beyond Allen’s initial intention, introducing to wider circulation not only the poets represented in its pages but the categories, or movements, with which the poets were (with varying degrees of accuracy) associated: The New York school, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beat poets, the Black Mountain school. Allen understood that this categorization was less simplistic than it may seem; some of the poets associated with the Beat movement, for example, may not have even been friends, much less conscious colleagues. Still, the forms were enduring, and even among the ranks of the self-styled avant-garde, the movements Allen identified are now accepted as given categories. Such is the power of the well-placed anthology.

Allen’s own characterization of the New American Poetry he attempts to represent is fairly simple: in his introduction to the volume, her claims that “[this poetry] has shown one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (Allen xi)—and further, they are “closely allied to modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting” (Allen xii). Quips Marjorie Perloff: “Pound’s ‘Make it New!’ thus becomes Allen’s ‘Keep it Brief!’” (Perloff 106). Yet Perloff also notes: “Allen is guided by two simple principles of selection: nonpublication in the major venues and…group identity or what we might call
community" (Perloff 106). And community is, in fact, at the crux of the avant-garde impulse: a joining against the dominant mode as it is perceived—and a joining with those who perceive the same dominant mode. For Allen, the more improvisational energies of jazz and abstract expressionism are “allied” against the reactionary and “typical” academic verse (both formalism and confessionalism seem to be implicated here), but as we shall see, later moments in the avant-garde rejected music and musicality, painting and imagism, and even spoken language.

*The New American Poetry 1945-1960* is exemplary of the publications this project will examine, not least because of the influence of its regional and social categorization and its reification of the “movement” as social and literary phenomenon. One of the more salient features of the various and often overlapping groups that have attempted to represent the avant-garde in American poetry from the early days of modernism onward is the perceived necessity of a community of like-minded artists devoted to a coherent artistic objective or set of objectives. Such literary communities have long developed more or less loosely around the complex relationships and lines of influence running between poets and writers, and the publishers, critics, elder poets, and others who choose to promote—and to collect—their work in anthologies and periodicals. The resulting texts are teaching texts: anthologies and periodicals of the “new”, “innovative”, or “avant-garde” prepare their readers to read beyond their covers, to seek out deeper acquaintance with those represented in its pages. They create order, arranging more or less disparate works in some kind
of relationship, aesthetic, chronological, regional, or otherwise, and present a
version of literary history.

Recent scholars have approached the problem of the anthology from a
variety of perspectives, many of which seem dogged by an almost existential
anxiety. Editor Robert McLaughlin explores the “distance between
conceptualization and actualization” he encountered when working on
_Innovations: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Fiction_ (McLaughlin 90);
Karen Kilcup, editor of _Nineteenth-Century Women Writers_, agonizes over the
slippery slope of “excellence, representativeness (and/or comprehensiveness),
and interest” as criteria for selection (Kilcup 37). And Marjorie Perloff’s self-
assured attempt to chart the avant-garde anthologies of the nineties finally
concludes that “it is no longer possible, as it was for Donald Allen, to present
readers with an anthology of _the_ or even _a_ definitive New American Poetry…the
communities of poets [have] vastly proliferated and the old dichotomies
eroded…I wish the anthologies I have been discussing had been less
extravagant in their claims” (Perloff 118). At the root of these difficulties lies the
problem of societal affiliation—so important to the avant-garde artist, yet
apparently at such cross-purposes to her politics.

_Literary collections are_ political, but not only in the more common sense of
their complicity in canon formation: each gives insight into its literary moment
through the relationships, alliances, and conflicts which contributed to its
instantiation. Each of these anthologies and periodicals provides a useful location
for an examination of the ways in which the avant-garde, or various strains of the
avant-garde, have been defined at particular historical moments and in retrospect. This project examines the apparent consensus within a number of collections of avant-garde poetry and poetics that change—exploration of various ideas of “the new”—in poetry must take place within the readership and as part of a community: we must create an audience, they say, if the audience will not come to us; and further, we will do so not only by presenting our work and the work of our like-minded contemporaries, but by writing voluminously and vigorously in defense of our poetics.

This impulse might be traced back to the essentially Romantic notion that the moment of composition has the power to transform the consciousness of the poet, just as later, the poem, at the moment of reception, has the power to transform the minds of its audience. It is assumed that poetic language at its best is somehow qualitatively different from language with different utilitarian aims, which attempts communication of a different order: poetic language, and only poetic language, has this transformative and and liberatory potential. Still, the qualities of “poetic language” remain contestable, particularly in the realm of the avant-garde. William Carlos Williams’ movement toward the rhythms of plain speech—and the later Ezra Pound’s move away from those rhythms—is followed closely by the Language writers’ rejection of speech in favor of text, and so on.

Still, the powerful optimism that motivates avant-garde action—the transformative power of opposition—remains strong. At any given historical moment, we may find several versions of “the new” and “the innovative” circling among poets; for instance, the contemporary avant-garde scene which emerged
out of the shadow of poets like the Language writers, the New York School, and others has very little in common with the New Formalists, who hope to revive much older forms and techniques and present them as the “real” new. (This type of aesthetic return is, as I shall show, actually a common shift within an avant-garde movement.) It is, perhaps, possible to consider all of literary history as a string of avant-garde moments, one style after another giving rise to its opposition.

In order to frame a discussion of the ways in which poetries and poetics have been presented and anthologized, I will be making use of the terms “avant-garde,” “experimental,” and “innovative” to describe a set of techniques and preoccupations. It will be necessary, however difficult, to clarify my use of these terms; “avant-garde” and “experimental” have meant many things to countless writers, artists and thinkers, with varying degrees of consistency. I will take as a central assumption that “avant-garde” status is not granted through any identifiable and fixed aesthetic or political affiliation, or by any subjectively exciting or “new” choices in form, style or content, however obviously conventional or experimental some poets’ work may appear. It is characterized by certain formal and stylistic choices, yes, but more consistently through a particular aesthetic/political attitude.

Further, I will avoid making general statements about the nature of avant-garde work across generic boundaries; the avant-garde in architecture, for instance, is beyond the scope of this study. And although avant-garde writers from Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein to the more contemporary John Ashbery
and the New York School influenced, and were heavily influenced by, avant-garde painting, the relationship between avant-garde poetry and other forms of innovative art, writing, and cultural production, except as it directly affects the work of the poets represented in this study, is not my primary concern.

This study will not attempt to chart the formation of every literary movement since modernism, and it would be disingenuous to insist that my distinctions are drawn only on the basis of a preoccupation with group formation, self-promotion, and opposition, which qualities are, after all, hardly original to poets. It is possible to identify a few stylistic trends and commonalities between the movements I have chosen to treat, partially because they are so conscious of and invested in their own avant-garde status. In fact, this very self-consciousness is their first, and perhaps most important, distinguishing characteristic. Secondly, I argue that within each of the avant-garde moments represented by the texts I will be discussing, a tension can be identified between “plain speech,” a colloquial, “American”-style free-verse language; and on the other, a sort of “accretive” avant-garde writing. Accretive writing is just that: in various ways it collects material, building on its own structures with reference, allusion, found language, an amalgam of styles and voices, and so on. Other frequent indicators of this style are its mistrust of the cult of authorship and its attempts (not always successful) to refuse the lyric mode, with voice either entirely disembodied or endlessly multiplied; the treatment of language as material, both visually and sonically, separated from its signification; and an intellectual difficulty, a certain alienating quality.
And finally, the movements considered in this study share a genealogy; they place themselves in conversation through a careful exploration of their own literary origins. The Language-affiliated writers turn again and again to the foundational influence of Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein; today’s avant or “post-avant” writers look to the Language writers. Movements like the Harlem Renaissance, the New Formalists, the Beats, and the confessional mode will not be treated at length, however innovative they may have been, for a number of reasons. The New Formalists’ interest in traditional poetic structures, the confessional tendency toward colloquialism and speech-based patterning, the overt musicality and dialect-based rhythms of the Harlem Renaissance all work at cross-purposes from the strategies of textual complication, materiality, and alienation from speech practiced by the “avant-garde” poets I will consider in this study. The Beats do explore some interesting textual territory—the materiality of *On the Road* in scroll form is unavoidable—but ultimately their style (as a group; though I’m aware that exceptions to any designation exist) is deeply colloquial and jazz-influenced as well.

Developing a methodology appropriate to the consideration of literary publications, and particularly literary collections, is challenging. The emphasis on joining, selection, collaboration, and group definition of this study might benefit from purely sociological attention; its interest in the self-defining textual strategies of a particular avant-garde genealogy seems to demand close reading of countless texts. Consideration of textual production requires a new-historical perspective, and simply defining “avant-garde” is a question for the philosophers
and theoreticians. This study might be considered somewhat of a hybrid, with all
the joys and dangers of hybrid status: trying to be all things, it runs the risk of
doing none well. But the material seems to demand a certain hybridization of
approach and attitude; in all, it is a study of the way certain groups of people at
very particular moments have “done” poetry—not just written it, or talked about it,
or published it, but all of the above. It examines the ways the writing, theorizing,
promoting, publishing, and living of poetry have intersected in service of the
slippery creative impulse we call the “avant-garde.”

Chapter One begins with a consideration of theories of the avant-garde,
via Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger, who provide a vocabulary for the
discussion of the way community-building functions and occurs for avant-garde
practitioners. It turns to a discussion of Ezra Pound, and his protégé and foil,
William Carlos Williams. It looks at Pound’s relationships with Williams and
Harriet Monroe through Poetry magazine and the publication of a series of
anthologies dedicated to the promotion of the “new” poetry; these poets, their
relationships, and their publications are shown to be the models for later
generations of avant-garde poets. Alfred Kreymbourg’s journal Others, a
contemporary of Poetry, is also examined. In this chapter, close reading will be
much less important than an examination of attitudes toward poetry and poetry-
as-movement as exhibited in the work of these exemplary modernists.

Chapter Two addresses Gertrude Stein’s influence on later avant-garde
American poets, from Charles Bernstein to the more recent, “post-avant” set. In
her generically hybrid prose/poems, Stein presents a model for the semantic
linking, narrative dislocation, and hyper-aware textuality further explored in the work of the Language writers. Her poetic practice provides an alternative to the Pound/Williams dichotomy, one all the more potent for its apparent impenetrability. With its pedagogic tone, How To Write is a particularly interesting example of the hybrid style in question; a closer look at the operations of this unusual text reveals how truly influential the style has been on American avant-garde poetic practice.

Chapter Three positions the Language writers of the 1980s as the true contemporary inheritors of the varying strains of avant-garde poetry and poetics that began with Pound and Stein. Their faith in the transformative political power of poetic language can be traced back through modernist poetry, perhaps as far as Emerson; this optimism, in all its forms, is an essential part of avant-garde practice. A number of collections of Language writing demonstrate various examples of this optimistic attitude, and illuminate the many ways in which contemporary avant-garde writing rehearses the aesthetic and community-building practices pioneered by Pound and Stein.

The final chapter of this study turns to some contemporary inheritors of these avant-garde preoccupations. Bill Lavender’s anthology Another South offer us an opportunity to consider the intersection between literary regionalism—in this case, southernism—and avant-garde or experimental practice. Through studies by Jerome McGann, Benjamin Friedlander, and others, I consider emerging digital poeties and poetic communities. Finally, I turn to the Lucifer Poetics Group, a loose community of poets based in North Carolina united only
by geography and a shared interest in avant-garde poetry and poetics. The communication (and miscommunications) between their online presence, a listserv, and their physical, real-time interactions, is the avant-garde poetic community’s contemporary incarnation, linking of avant-garde literary practice to the publication and distribution of texts representative of its processes.

At the crux of this project is an odd tension: in attempting to describe avant-garde poets’ attempts to form an avant-garde community and readership through collection and publication, it in turn must collect and publish, include and exclude. Yet this project does not insist upon a particular judgment of the avant-garde process, its aesthetic, its strategies, or its objective artistic strength. Naturally, an author’s writing follows her pleasure, and many of these poetries give me great pleasure.
CHAPTER 1: MAPPING A MOVEMENT: THE “FEBRILE ANXIETY” OF THE AVANT-GARDE

1.1: “Avant-Garde”: Analysis and Practice

As Renato Poggioli has it in his still-important 1962 work *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*: “Ideology…is always a social phenomenon. In the case of the avant-garde, it is an argument of self-assertion or self-defense used by a society in the strict sense against society in the larger sense” (Poggioli 4). He goes on to assert that “we might even say that avant-garde ideology is a social phenomenon precisely because of the social or antisocial character of the cultural and artistic manifestations that it sustains and expresses” (Poggioli 4). In this sense, modern and contemporary avant-garde movements can be read at least partially as the result of the push-and-pull tension described above: toward social cohesion, yet against perceived societal norms, as preoccupied with its own unity as it is with the dissolution of other, prior unities. Poggioli explores the ground of this tension through the relationship of the avant-garde to fashion and alienation, and indeed, the societal norms so frustrating to the avant-garde artist are expressed most fully through their reaction to aesthetic and intellectual trends and fashions. In short, the “avant-garde” is less an aesthetic category than a political and social position toward the habits of cultural production.
Poggioli also briefly treats the focus of this study: “one of the external
signs most characteristically avant-garde to the highest degree of development:
periodicals of the group or movement” (Poggioli 21). These periodicals took a
variety of forms:

Sometimes the goal of the little review is merely to
publish proclamations and programs or a series of
manifestos, announcing the foundations of a new
movement, explicating and elaborating its doctrine,
categorically and polemically. Or they merely present
to a friendly or hostile public an anthology of the
collective work in a new tendency or by a new group
of artists and writers. (Poggioli 22)

This summation, while incomplete, touches on two of the avant-garde
publication’s most essential functions: to announce and explicate its program,
and to present its work, generally identified either self-consciously or editorially
as “new” in some fashion, to some version of the public. There is a certain
defensiveness to the avant-garde publication, an assumption that the “public” is
either ignorant of or unfriendly toward its efforts. In fact, current anthologies and
publications clearly target the already-initiate, responding to a call from within
avant-garde ranks for a representation, or a new representation, of their work.¹

Harriet Monroe, editor of the foundational publication of the contemporary
American avant-garde, Poetry magazine, did initially have a wider readership and

¹ Poggioli describes the audiences thus: “the indifferent and hostile, traditional
and academic one, and that public, as much more limited as it is more
enthusiastic, of its followers and supporters” (Poggioli 149). This conflation of the
hostile audience with the academic has, as we shall see, become more difficult to
maintain.
a transformation of general reading practices in mind; just how this stance shifted under the influence of Ezra Pound will be discussed later.

Renato Poggioli divides avant-garde movements into four types, and these distinctions have been important enough to avant-garde studies that they warrant further explanation. These categories are not so much types as sets of motivations, which Poggioli ascribes, either fully or in combination, to various avant-garde movements (his preferred term) since romanticism. (Poggioli considers romanticism, with its cult of the ideal, its rejection of the past, and its preoccupation with the individual consciousness, the obvious precedent for every avant-garde movement since.) The most useful of these are the final three (the first, “activism”, in which a movement “takes shape…out of the sheer joy of dynamism” (Poggioli 25) is more difficult to track and thus less applicable): antagonism, nihilism, and agonism.

Antagonism, or the antagonistic movement, may well be the most obvious of the avant-garde motivations, at least in retrospect. Again, from Poggioli:

[A] movement formed in part or in whole to agitate against something or someone. The something may be the academy, tradition; the something may be a master whose teaching and example, whose prestige and authority, are considered wrong or harmful. More often than now, the someone is that collective individual called the public. However, and whenever, this spirit of hostility and opposition appears, it reveals a permanent tendency that is characteristic of the avant-garde movement. (Poggioli 26)
This “permanent tendency” is that of opposition, of an antagonistic stance not only toward literary and artistic convention, but most essentially toward the double threat to the new: influence and history.

The third of Poggioli’s groupings takes its cue from the former: he considers nihilism “a kind of transcendental antagonism” (Poggioli 26): a love of disorder for its own sake, a commitment to the breaking down of structures and barriers, no matter their content or consequence. The last of these terms, agonism, is psychologically more complex and likely difficult to track, but it’s worth mention: it occurs when an artist sacrifices her own credibility, popularity, and likely, her livelihood, in her commitment to the new:

we ultimately see that, in the febrile anxiety to go always further, the movement and its constituent human entity can reach the point where it no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition. It even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements. This fourth aspect or posture we may define with the name agonism or the agonistic moment. (Poggioli 26)

This “febrile anxiety to go always further”, then, leads the avant-garde artist to personal and professional, possibly even spiritual, ruin.

Poggioli’s analysis, at its weakest, tends toward a more or less superficial speculation about the psychology of avant-garde artists, an inspection of personal motivation rather than of actual, historically grounded phenomena. Peter Bürger attempts to address this disparity in his 1984 study Theory of the Avant-Garde, positioning himself in the space left by the theoretical approaches
to the avant-garde put forth by Adorno, on the one hand, and Lukács on the other.

Bürger has it thus:

To the extent that post-1848 literature moves away from the model of classical realism, Lukács views it as a symptom of the decay of bourgeois society. The avant-garde movements are a major example of such decay. Adorno, by contrast, attempted to construct the development of art in bourgeois society after the model of an increase in rationality, a growing command of man over his art. The vanishing point of this theory is a view of the avant-garde movements as the most advanced stage of art in bourgeois society. (Bürger 1i)

Bürger himself emphasizes his focus on the historically grounded choices and circumstances of the avant-garde over any evaluation of the relative aesthetic success or efficacy of such movements; his approach aspires to the sociological, passing beyond the value-judgments he finds implicit in Adorno and Lukács, and certainly beyond Poggioli. In his first chapter, Bürger attempts to define a more useful brand of criticism, or what he calls “critical literary science”: “Critical science differs from traditional science because it reflects the social significance of its activity…I am not referring to that naïve equation of individual motivation and social relevance that we encounter occasionally today on the Left” (Bürger 3); it is difficult not to read dismissal of Poggioli’s psychological bent here.

Bürger’s text attempts to provide a Marxist and new-historical reading of aesthetic history which sets the avant-garde as an artistic return to high aestheticism in opposition to the labor-classes’ integration of art with life, form with function: for example, the way the nineteenth-century novel mirrored the
lives of its bourgeois and working-class readers (Bürger 27). In this sense, the very inaccessibility of the avant-garde is a classic means of social stratification: “The evolution of art as a distinct subsystem that began with l’art pour l’art and was carried to its conclusion in Aestheticism must be seen in connection with the tendency toward the division of labor underway in bourgeois society” (Bürger 32): art turns on itself, becomes more specialized, reified, and exclusive. Finally, the reception and criticism of art are taken up by the artists themselves and incorporated into the works. Although Bürger uses the evolution of French and German literary and visual arts as the grounds for his theory, this same move emerges, as we shall see, in much of late-twentieth century American avant-garde poetics.

1.2: Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams: The American Avant-Garde, Two Ways

The division within the American avant-garde that emerged through the work of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams laid out the terms of an aesthetic and intellectual split within American avant-garde poetry that continues into the 21st century. Although Pound and Williams each moved widely beyond the tenets that defined their early careers, they developed what would arguably become the major strains in avant-garde poetics: Williams a colloquial, conversational style, Pound the high-literary complexly accretive techniques of the Canons. These two impulses—toward “plain speech” on the one hand, and toward a more difficult, allusive, mosaic intellectualism on the other—can be found endlessly repeating, and endlessly conflicting, through collections of
American avant-garde poetries since the 1920s, culminating in what Jerome McGann calls “the central struggle of 1946-73 between the ‘academics’ and the ‘New American writers’” (McGann, *Contemporary Poetry* 255). The development seems to have worked this way: the Williams strain gave birth to the “anti-academic” New Americans; the Pound led to the headier work of the Language writers. Each camp presents itself as anti-academic, anti-traditional; each enjoys the benefits of academic alliances and carries out the early 20th century avant-garde agenda. Where, in all this influence, is the “real” avant-garde?

William Carlos Williams insisted, famously, “no ideas but in things,” and the debate that has emerged offers generations of poets two poles around which to arrange their allegiances. However, the theoretical split between “ideas” and “things” is not so simply put, or executed, especially in the slippery world of poetic practice. Poems are either ideas, or things, or both, or neither; they are variously considered objects made of words, ideas expressed in language, machines, emotions, and so on. Imagism, as it was presented by the young Ezra Pound to Williams, H. D. and others, insisted on the possibility of the direct presentation of the thing through language; Pound’s attraction to the Chinese character, what he called the “ideogram,” also stems from this dream of a language perfectly coordinated with its signification.

The desire to circumvent the mediating power of language is not unique to the early Pound and Williams; this mistrust of too much intervention—through authority, speech, influence, and other linguistic functions—returns throughout later linguistic, literary, and social criticism. In this light, this longing for the
experience of the thing-in-itself may appear naïve, even quaint; but Pound’s reaction precipitated the classic position of the American avant-garde: opposition. Indeed, the avant-garde in twentieth-century American poetry and poetics can be characterized as a dual position of reversal and return: a reversal of current trends, and a return to the preoccupations of earlier avant-garde moments. To return to Renato Poggioli’s useful “antagonism”: the avant-garde may be marked quite simply as not so much a set of techniques and interests as a basic oppositional stance to one’s predecessors.

In 1908 Pound described to William Carlos Williams the “ultimate attainments of poesy…1. To paint the thing as I see it. 2. Beauty. 3. Freedom from didacticism. 4. It is only good manners if you repeat a few other men to at least do it better or more briefly” (Letters 40). These ideas would reappear in slightly more articulated form in Poetry in 1913; the essay, “Imagisme,” was drafted by Pound but signed by F. S. Flint, and is staged as a comical pseudo-interview with “an imagiste”:

[The Imagistes] had a few rules, drawn up for their own satisfaction only, and they had not published them. They were:

1. Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

By these standards they judged all poetry, and found most of it wanting. (Pound, Early Writings 209-210)
Ezra Pound was a great one for lists and tenets; this systematic treatment of aesthetic principles characterizes much of his early work. Imagism is, arguably, the movement for which Pound is most commonly known, in spite of its relatively short life-span within the course of his career. Imagism proper had its start, according to Pound, in or around the “spring or early summer of 1912” (Pound LE 3), when he, Hilda Doolittle (H. D.) and Richard Aldington composed the movement’s three primary goals later attributed to Flint’s interview with “an imagiste”; a version of these would also appear in Pound’s “A Few Don’ts.” Certainly it was Imagism that by 1913 had cemented Pound’s reputation as an important literary promoter and critic on the London scene.

The fate of the Imagist movement is intextricable from the trajectory of the various publications representing its work. After reading about the Imagists, discovering H. D.’s poetry in Poetry magazine, and identifying Imagist tendencies within her own poetry, millionairess Amy Lowell secured an introduction to Pound through Harriet Monroe; this relationship, and Lowell’s own adoption and promotion of Imagism (which Pound was dismissively to call “Amygism”), was to set in motion Pound’s eventual disenchantment with the movement he had so effectively founded. It was Pound who initially encouraged Lowell to become an editor: during one of his brief resignations from his position as Foreign Editor of Poetry magazine he intended to begin his own journal, The Egoist, to serve as an Imagist organ; he invited Amy Lowell to serve as its editor. Pound biographer J. J. Wilhelm speculates that Lowell’s refusal may have arisen from her growing suspicion of Pound’s mercenary motives. In any case, Lowell finally decided to
publish her own Imagist anthologies away from Pound’s influence, leading to what Wilhelms calls “a Calliopean public relations movement on a worldwide basis that would promote free verse in a way that would be both effective and somewhat vulgar” (Wilhelm 142)—a move that would alienate Pound’s attentions to the movement and focus them instead on his new interest, vorticism.

Through William Carlos Williams’ long correspondence with Ezra Pound we can glimpse some of the earliest and most coherent explications of the Imagist project. However, the letters also offer another important way of thinking about Williams’ plain-speaking, highly visual style: its “Americanness”, or lack thereof. Certainly Williams has become known as a pioneer of the American poetic idiom, but just what relationship this quality, or set of qualities, has to Imagism is complicated. In his introduction to Williams’ Selected Poems Randall Jarrell enthuses:

Williams found his own sort of imagism considerably harder to modify. He had a boyish delight and trust in Things: there is always on his lips the familiar, pragmatic, American These are the facts—for he is the most pragmatic of writers, and so American that the adjective itself seems inadequate…one exclaims in despair and delight: He is the America of poets. Few of his poems has that pure crystalline inconsequence that the imagist poem ideally has—the world and Williams himself kept breaking into them; and this was certainly their salvation. (Williams, Selected Poems xi-xii)

Here we see the American dream of poetry: Williams’ “pragmatism” lending an almost utilitarian bent to his poetry. He is not only an American poet, he is “the America of poets,” a perfect marriage of Imagist-style clarity with American
character and economy; the true anti-establishment, even avant-garde position. Jarrell continually refers to the democratic nature of Williams' work: "He feels, not just says, that the differences between men are less important than their similarities—that he and you and I, together, are the Little Men" (Williams, SP xiii). He sympathizes with Williams' "real and unusual dislike of, distrust in, Authority" (Williams, SP xiii). And he attempts to describe this American style: "full of imperatives, exclamations, trochees—the rhythms and dynamics of their speech are being insisted upon as they could not be in any prose" (Williams, SP xvii). Jarrell paints for us a contemporary Whitman, in content and attitude if not in style: the great equalizer, the Little Man of poetry, the unafraid bucker of authority, abandoning Whitman's linguistic quirkiness for a more accessible, colloquial idiom, but continuing his philosophical project.

Williams' poetry did, indeed, fit these criteria; it ranges from the famed Imagist simplicity of "The Red Wheel-Barrow" to the colloquial invective of 1927's "Impromptu: The Suckers": "Take it out in vile whisky, take it out / in lifting your skirts to show your silken / crotches; it is this that is intended. / You are it. Your pleas will always be denied. / You too will always go up with the two guys…" (Williams, SP 45). Even Paterson appears bright and uncomplicated beside Pound's Cantos. Later, Asphodel, That Greeny Flower appeared, a ruminative, perambulatory stream of consciousness, deceptively simple, deeply philosophical, that influenced later free-verse innovators such as A. R. Ammons.

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2 Still, as Marjorie Perloff points out, the pre-Imagist Williams was author to 1909's Poems and 1913's The Tempers, both characterized by formalism and Poundian archaisms (Perloff, Dance of the Intellect 92-93).
Williams was far from unconscious of his role as the “America of poets”; indeed he sought to cultivate it, mainly through his idiom, but also in his choice of subject matter in both poetry and prose.

The young Ezra Pound’s relationship to Williams’ Americanness, conceptually and personally, was vexed, as is evident in many of his early letters to Williams. Hugh Witemeyer, who collected and edited the existing letters, saw a foreshadowing of Pound’s fascism in these attitudes, reminding us that

In the Prologue to *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*…Williams took on the expatriate American poets—Pound, Eliot, and H. D. The expatriates, Williams argued, were too Europeanized, too cosmopolitan and deracinated, to be representative of American verse…Williams directly quotes several passages from a letter Pound wrote him on November 10, 1917. In this letter, Pound defends cosmopolitanism and argues that Williams’ mixed ancestry compromises his nationalistic aesthetics. The quotations show how early and how firmly racist assumptions were established in Pound’s thinking… (*Pound and Williams Selected Letters* 5)

Although the leap from the type of ribbing Pound heaps on Williams in the early letters to his later attraction to fascism is perhaps a long one, it does demonstrate an attraction to elitism and its relationship to nationalism. Unfortunately, many of Williams’ letters are missing from the early period of their correspondence, 1907 through roughly 1920. Only Pound’s impassioned responses, full of more or less loving abuse, remain to tell the story. In 1917 he answers what we may assume to be Williams’ challenge to return to his “father land” thus: “I note your invitation to return to my father land (pencil at the top of your letter sic g. t. h. [go to hell], I shall probably accept it at the end of the war” (*Pound, Selected Letters* 30). From
there, his arguments grow more infuriated and less consistent, though clearly with some measure of comic self-awareness, from “Wot bloody kind of an author are you save Amerikun (same as me)” (Pound, SL 30) to “And America. What the hell do you a bloomin foreigner know about the place. Your pere only penetrated the edge…I (der grosse Ich) have the virus, the baccillus [sic] of the land in my blood, for neary [sic] three bleating centuries” (Pound, SL 31). He concludes, “The thing that saves your work is opacity, and dont you forget it. Opacity is NOT an American quality. Fizz, swish, gabble of verbiage, these are echt Amerikanish” (Pound, SL 31).

It’s difficult to be confident of Pound’s intention in this last statement, it veers so far from the Imagist rhetoric with which he so frequently had harangued his friend; we are tempted to read it as irony. Still, we have a sense that Pound means something very particular by “opacity”: an opacity of surface, opposed to the linguistic trimmings of much traditional turn-of-the-century American and British poetry. In essence, Pound is both scoffing at Williams’ personal un-Americanness, and congratulating him that his work does not sink to the level of “echt Amerikanish” poetry. In either case, he would have taken great contention with any characterization of Williams as the “America of poetry”—however instrumental he was in guiding Williams, through Imagism, toward the style that earned him that reputation.

Clearly, the “freedom from didacticism” that Pound cherished so much in poetry did not apply to his own poetics. While he insisted on “plain speaking” in
the work of his friends and associates, his own early poetry was often deeply archaic, making continual reference to antiquity and often borrowing some version of its diction. Consider these lines from 1909’s “Piere Vidal Old”: “O Age gone lax! O stunted followers, / That mask at passions and desire desires, / Behold me shrieveled, and your mock of mocks…” (Pound, *Early Writings* 21). T. S. Eliot called Pound’s early work “rather fancy old-fashioned romantic stuff, cloak-and-dagger kind of stuff” (Eliot, *Critical Heritage* 40); a *Book News Monthly* notice commented “the academician bristles all over his work” (*Critical Heritage* 42).

But by the time he began work on what would become the *Cantos*, Pound was working in a vein different from either the more painterly impulses of the early Imagists or Williams’ high Americanisms. In the *Cantos* there emerged a poetics dedicated, on the one hand, to the exploration of things—including words—as manifestations of ideas, or Ideas, as embodiments of what is in its truest form entirely abstract: not only abstract in the neo-Platonic sense, though likely the impulse owes much to that essential dichotomy, but also as a locus of colliding ideas, overlapping and vanishing conceptual threads.

Yet on the other hand, the *Cantos*’ vision of history and influence incorporates found language and archaism alongside visual techniques and self-consciously alienating language, low colloquialisms beside the loftiest archaic and Whitmanian diction, archaisms, allusions, and references in the high-modernist style. Take, for example, these lines from Canto XXXVI: “Where memory liveth, / it takes its state / Formed like a diafan from light on shade /
Which shadow cometh of Mars and remaineth / Created, having a name sensate,
/ Custom of the soul, / will from the heart; / Cometh from a seen form which being
understood / Taketh locus…” (Pound, *Cantos* 27). Then consider XXXVIII: “An’
that year Metevsky went over to America del Sud / (and the Pope’s manners
were so like Mr. Joyce’s, / got that way in the Vatican, / weren’t like that before) /
Marconi knelt in the ancient manner / like Jimmie Walker sayin’ his prayers”
(Pound, *Cantos* 37). Later Cantos exhibit even more philosophical and linguistic
complexity, interweaving dictions, languages, and modalities, an almost
overwhelming historical accretion. It is not my intention to provide a systematic
study of the *Cantos*, to which many prior volumes have already been dedicated,
but it’s clear that Pound’s influence continues to make itself felt through the
*Cantos* in later generations of avant-garde work.

In his *The ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American
Poetic Tradition*, Christopher Beach remarks of later poetic innovators Robert
Duncan and Robert Creeley:

During the 1940s, when poets of Duncan’s and
Creeley’s generation reached their maturity, Pound
and Williams appeared to many to be the only viable
poetic models. Other choices of poetic forebears
included a return to the Georgians (the worst kind of
conservative and sentimental verse), the clever and
highly formal poetry of the “Ransom-Tate nexus”
(compared by Creeley to “antiques” made by “awfully-
old-Southern-gentlemen), and the loosely affiliated
Modernism represented by Eliot, Moore, and Stevens,
poets who seemed neither completely committed to
the formal tradition nor part of the open tradition of
Pound and Williams. (Beach 23)
And indeed, the question of influence is perhaps nowhere more obvious than within generations of the avant-garde. Pound’s and Williams’ poetry, and particularly their often-conflicting poetics, set the terms of an argument that is still being rehearsed; their relationship, and the ideologies that fortified and damaged that relationship, is endlessly repeated. It is Pound’s unique relationship to tradition and influence, Beach argues, that made him so appealing to later poets:

> It was Pound’s more idiosyncratic, iconoclastic, and interactive sense of tradition, rather than Eliot’s notion of tradition as orthodoxy, that appealed to postwar poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. They and other poets of the 1950s and 1960s saw in Pound’s poetry and concerns an alternative model of literary Modernism to what they considered the more rigid and hierarchical set of values and expectations represented by Eliot and the New Criticism. (Beach 18)

Olson and Duncan both later appeared, prominently, as the brightest of the vanguard in Allen’s *New American Poetry 1945-1960*.

Both Pound and Williams have achieved iconic status, so profoundly that their work might be said to be, along with Eliot, the canonical influence against which all American—not to mention experimental—poetry must measure and struggle. However, Pound’s early work as a critic and editor—his discovery and promotion of poets like H. D. (“Imagiste”), his work with Harriet Monroe and *Poetry* magazine, and his editorial impact on H. D., Williams, and others—speaks just as strongly to the state of the avant-garde in the following eighty or more years. Just how these lines of influence played themselves out in the publications of later American avant-garde poets will be discussed in the following chapters.
1.3: A New Forum: *Poetry* Magazine

It is impossible to consider the theoretical or practical trends in American avant-garde poetry and publication without considering the publications and editors who promoted those movements. For Ezra Pound, there were two great phases in publication: his involvement with *Poetry* magazine, and James Laughlin’s New Directions Press. In the early part of Pound’s career, *Poetry* helped promote the Imagist agenda, as well as introduce many of the poets who would become the most powerful influences in Modernist poetry; later on, James Laughlin’s open support and publication of Pound’s work (what Gregory Barnhisel calls his “remaking”\(^3\)) rescued Pound from the obscurity that threatened to ruin a reputation already tarnished by his association with fascist Italy and his long incarceration. Each of these phases is emblematic of certain of the powerful and complicated relationship between any writer and her publisher, but as we shall see, the issues of collection and publication are particularly fraught in the realm of the avant-garde.

A closer look at *Poetry* magazine will prove most instructive for this study; although Laughlin did publish an annual journal, *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, it is as the publisher and promoter of the *Cantos* in book form that he had the most influence over Pound’s work. *Poetry* was a journal, a *collection*, through which Pound and Harriet Monroe attempted to provide a long look at what they came to see as a movement in new poetry. Laughlin’s journal and publishing

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\(^3\) A full account of James Laughlin’s rehabilitation of Pound’s career and reputation can be found in *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*, Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.
house had many of the same aims—to represent the “new” and innovative in contemporary poetry—but its influence, reach, financial systems, and industry status as a publisher of single-author volumes were much different from those of a fledgling journal, however well-funded and connected.

This study is most concerned with the publication and promotion of multi-author collections intended to present the most interesting work of each avant-garde literary-historical moment: periodicals and anthologies. It would be wrong to conflate the functions of the two, however. Both attempt to represent a constellation of literary relationship, influence, and production, but a periodical almost always tries to capture a moment as it happens and follow it as it continues to happen; it is a sort of commentary, organizing its contributions as it goes along. Anthologies are equally time-bound, but they have an inevitably retrospective approach, even if they are only assembled twenty minutes after the fact: they speak from a unity already assembled from within or editorially. Poetry magazine is a particularly interesting case because it came to represent a movement in “new poetry”, and directly or indirectly gave rise to and communicated with at least three anthologies: Ezra Pound’s Des Imagistes, Amy Lowell’s Some Imagist Poets, and Pound’s Catholic Anthology.

The status of the periodical as literary artifact is a matter of critical debate: as Susan Belasco Smith and Kenneth M. Price ask in their Introduction to Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America, “Is a periodical a single text or is it the sum total of the many texts that appear in competing columns and
Both approaches are tempting but dangerous; in the former, we attribute perhaps too much weight to the agency of a single editor-as-author, lending a false unity to a multiauthor text, while with the latter approach (though it has its utility and is even appropriate in some cases), we lose that editorial influence, the arrangement of pieces and voices that distinguishes the periodical from the single-author text. Critics of both the periodical and the anthology have had to contend with the tension between the values and interests inherent in each singular piece represented and the editorial attentions that arranged them.

*Poetry* magazine emerged at an important juncture in the history of the American periodical. Consider David Abrahamson on the rise in popularity and distribution of periodicals that took place in the early twentieth century:

Prior to its emergence as a truly mass medium, most magazines served small, relatively elite, audiences. In the late nineteenth century, however, a number of societal factors—the success of the Industrial Revolution, the spread of public education and the subsequent rise in literacy, and the coalescence of a national consumer market—all contributed to the expansion of the American middle class, the essential mass audience for the new large-circulation magazines. (Abrahamson 16)

*Poetry* came about at the beginning of that transformation. The development of a mass market for a publication, even a literary publication, was beginning to seem like a real possibility. Earlier in the nineteenth century, journals like the *Dial* had

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4 Price and Smith’s text arranges a number of essays on the influence of the nineteenth-century American periodical on the development of American literature as a whole, ranging from treatments of Whitman as periodical writer and poet to serialization, women’s and children’s literatures as they were first serialized, the Gothic, and African-American texts.
served as the organs for socio-literary movements such as Transcendentalism, and gone on to some prominence; some journals, like Harper’s Monthly and the Atlantic offered literary selections beside more casual, social offerings. Ten-cent magazines like McClure’s and the Ladies’ Home Journal had achieved mass-market popularity in the 1890s. With Poetry, Harriet Monroe set her sights on this type of distribution: a wide readership for poetry capitalizing on the increasing successes of the magazine publishing industry.

In August 1912, Ezra Pound responded to Harriet Monroe’s invitation to submit to, and participate in, her newest project: a magazine to be called Poetry, for which she had recently secured funding. Pound concurred, with reservations: “I am interested, and your scheme as far as I understand it seems not only sound, but the only possible method…But? Can you teach the American poet that poetry is an art…that must be in constant flux, a constant change of manner, if it is to live?” (Pound, Letters 43) Still, he agreed to submit much of his own work—“all that I have on my desk”—and noted that “if I can be of any use in keeping you or the magazine in touch with whatever is most dynamic in artistic thought, either here or in Paris…I shall be glad to do so” (Pound, Letters 44).

This cosmopolitan inclusiveness belies the complexity of Pound’s emerging position toward nationality and audience; with characteristic enthusiasm and more than a little appropriation he wrote Monroe in September of that year, “We [Poetry] must be taken seriously at once…My idea of our policy is this: We support American poets—preferably the young ones who have a serious determination to produce master-work. We import only such work as is better
than that produced at home” (Pound, *Letters* 45). Pound’s “American Risorgimento” would, it seemed, be instantiated through a careful and select presentation of the right kind of poetry to the right kind of people; however, he and Monroe diverged on the question of to whom the new poetry might most effectively be applied.

In the unremarkable American poetic landscape of 1911 and 1912, Monroe’s vision seemed either necessary genius or entirely misplaced. As Ellen Williams points out, Monroe was never personally associated with any kind of poetic avant-garde: “The poets whom she did know personally before *Poetry* appeared are not distinguished…Nor did she have contact with any group of young developing unknowns in Chicago” (Williams 4). In other words, Monroe did not set out to promote the work of her own coterie, or to advance the careers of friends. Her collaboration with Pound developed only after she solicited and received his help and interest in 1912, and in spite of Monroe’s impassioned introductions, it was Pound’s influence that led to the publication of much of the more innovative work, such as the short-lived Imagist movement.

Monroe took as a motto for her new publication a line from Walt Whitman: “To have great poets there must be great audiences too”; it appeared on *Poetry’s* cover, as well as on publicity circulars for the magazine. In one such circular, dated 1912, she asks poets to submit their best work to the cause: “to encourage the production and appreciation of poetry, as the other arts are encouraged…in order that this effort may be recognized as just and necessary, and may develop for this art a responsive public” (1912, italics mine)—the emphasis being on the
socio-pedagogical possibilities of a journal devoted to the best in poetry. And though the heyday of *Poetry* has come to be associated with the birth of a new, even an avant-garde American poetics, Monroe initially assumed a democratic, popular approach, stating in an editorial in the November 1912 issue: “The Open Door will be the policy of this magazine...To this end the editors hope to keep it free of entangling alliances with any single class or school” (Monroe, “The Open Door”, *Poetry*, Nov 1912).

The relationship between artist and audience was, to Monroe, primary, and would later be the source of a good deal of conflict with Ezra Pound. In the October 1914 issue of *Poetry* the two collaborated to publish something of their debate on the subject, opening with Pound’s opinion on Monroe’s choice of motto for the magazine: “I have protested in private, and I now protest more openly, against the motto on the cover of *Poetry*. The artist is not dependent on his audience. This sentence is Whitman tired” (Monroe and Pound 29). Pound’s artist was of a species above the average man, and should be treated so: “…this rest—this rabble, this multitude—does not create the great artist. They are aimless and drifting without him. They dare not inspect their own souls” (Monroe and Pound 30). He takes his cue from Dante: “When they asked him who was wisest in the city he answered, ‘He whom the fools hate most’” (Monroe and Pound 29).

Harriet Monroe’s attitude was much in keeping with the spirit of turn-of-the-century Chicago and the emerging modern mentality. She urges a consideration of the changing times: “Modern inventions, forcing international
travel, inter-racial thought, upon the world, have done away with Dante’s little audience, with his contempt for the crowd…the greatest danger which besets modern art is that of slighting the ‘great audience’ whose response alone can give it authority and volume” (Monroe and Pound 31). She even compares progress in the arts to that of the sciences, quoting her own article “The Bigness of the World”, which had appeared in a 1911 *Atlantic Monthly*: “Science takes no step forward that the man in the street does not know…Already there are many signs of an awakening of spiritual consciousness in the crowd” (Pound and Monroe 32). She argued that the greatest art came about as a result of a relationship between artist and audience; that a more “perfect” genius was created when this relationship was fulfilled. However, Pound’s vision of the American artist—fully modern, daring, and individualistic—did not include Monroe’s democratic artist-audience relationship. The two placed the artist on opposite sides of the American dream: on Monroe’s side were democracy, community, polyphony, science, and Walt Whitman; on Pound’s side, visionary, independence, indifference, innovation, and a very different Whitman.

Monroe’s preoccupation with audience was in part a natural response to the fact that she, unlike Pound, had to manage relations with *Poetry’s* investors, many of whom were known to her personally. Her old friend H. C. Chatfield-Taylor was the magazine’s main beneficiary; for Ellen Williams, who chronicled *Poetry’s* rise in her *Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance*, Chatfield-Taylor’s patronage was “a last gesture of the Gilded Age, an anachronism in a Chicago whose impulse to patronize the arts was daunted by the theories of
Thorstein Veblen” (Williams 15). Additional funds, most in the amount of fifty dollars a year, were provided by a number of donors, mostly of Chatfield-Taylor’s, Monroe’s, and Monroe’s late father’s acquaintance and social circle, including wealthy patrons of the arts, real estate magnates, the presidents of the Art Institute and Sears, Roebuck, professors, bankers, brokers, attorneys, and other notables.5

In spite of Pound’s relentlessly didactic prose and correspondence—which he called “my pamphleteering and polemical stuff” (Pound Letters 104)—he continued to admit little sympathy with or patience for Harriet Monroe’s desire to raise up a public readership, a “great audience” for poetry. In a letter to William Carlos Williams, dated October 21, 1908, years before the beginning of his relationship with Poetry, he writes:

As for the ‘eyes of too ruthless public’: damn their eyes. No art ever yet grew by looking into the eyes of the public, ruthless or otherwise. You can obliterate yourself and mirror God, Nature, or Humanity but if you try to mirror yourself in the eyes of the public, woe be unto your art. (Pound, Letters 37)

Later he insists to Monroe: “For GORD’S sake don’t print anything of mine that you think will kill the Magazine, but so far as I personally am concerned the public can go to the devil. It is the function of the public to prevent the artist’s expression by hook or by crook” (Pound, Letters 48). This attitude was to last throughout their relationship: in a letter dated March 1915 he asks her, “Can’t you

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ever see the difference between what is ‘good’, and good enough for the public, and what is ‘good’ for the artist, whose only respectable aim is perfection?” (Pound, *Letters* 98) In fact, in direct opposition to any attempt to make *Poetry* more accessible to a mass audience, he suggested to Monroe in 1916 that “Talking with Yeats yesterday, he said it is ‘ridiculous for *Poetry* to sell at six pence, you ought to charge a shilling.’ This point is perhaps worth considering” (Pound, *Letters* 117).

It would be a mistake to confuse Pound’s loathing for “the public” as a rejection of his present readership; Pound appeared content building an elite audience for his work (and all quality work) in Europe and, increasingly, in America. In 1922 he wrote William Carlos Williams: “Only those of us who know what civilization is, only those of us who want better literature, not more literature, better art, not more art can be expected to pay for it. No use waiting for masses to develop a finer taste, they aren’t moving that way” (Pound, *Letters* 54). The American Pound was not a Whitman, a Williams, or even a Harriet Monroe; indeed, in spite of his attempts to lay claim to a certain American pedigree, his idea of what constituted this pedigree was unique among his peers.

Thus, we discover a young Ezra Pound not *overtly* interested in public or political transformation, at least not for everyone; his stated interest in the early years was in the “art” of it, which he then, at least, did not consider a public issue. Still, “art” was and remains a highly politicized term, and Pound’s disdain for the “masses” seems at least a little disingenuous. We do find a version of the rhetoric of consciousness-transformation present in Pound’s early poetics: however,
while Monroe envisioned a revolution of the masses as a result of reading the new poetry, Pound was concerned only with the development of the consciousness of the individual genius and his fittest audience. He remained persistently opposed to what Jerome McGann would later call the “poetry of accommodation” (McGann, *Contemporary Poetry* 255), though “accommodating” poetry, for Pound, certainly differed from the accommodating, accessible poetry of the 21st century. Indeed, while for the early Pound the avant-garde impulse was to move away from richly patterned, supposedly derivative, traditional, formal verse and toward “plain speech,” the accommodating popular verse of the 21st century is exactly that plainspeaking American verse he so encouraged, now in the form of confessionalism, while the avant-garde turns to the complexity, fragmentation, accretion, and alienating techniques of the *Cantos*. We shall return to that subject in Chapter Two.

*Poetry* itself moved through identifiable cycles of advance and decline. Ellen Williams’ excellent chronicle *Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance* (University of Illinois Press, 1977) identifies 1912-1913 as “A Confused Beginning” and 1914-1915 as “The Great Years” (*Poetry* reached its apex of influence and success in 1914-1915, regularly publishing Pound, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, James Joyce, and other luminaries). Williams also attributes the beginning of its decline to 1916, when Harriet Monroe was forced to cut most contributors’ rates of payment from ten to eight dollars a page. Pound was offended and horrified by this shift (although he continued to be paid at the higher rate) and demanded that Monroe adopt a more selective editorial
policy, concentrating on the elite of the new poets instead of her previously more inclusive selection. (Pound was possibly unaware of the financial difficulties *Poetry* was facing from dwindling subscription rates—perhaps in part due to the wartime economy—and reduced enthusiasm and support from its benefactors.) Monroe, predictably, declined to alter her policies and continued to publish not only the recognized luminaries of the New Poetry, but representatives from all aesthetic schools (Williams 195-179). Perhaps as a result, poets like Eliot and Yeats vanished from its pages in 1916.

Pound himself was growing more and more frustrated with *Poetry*’s development, or what he saw as the lack thereof. In May 1917 he published a lengthy explication of his relationship to *Poetry*, announcing his intent to function as foreign editor to Margaret Anderson’s small but up-and-coming poetry journal *The Little Review*. Excerpted first in Ellen Williams’ text, the passage is telling enough to warrant repetition here:

I respect Miss Monroe for all that she has done for the support of American poetry, but in the conduct of her magazine my voice and vote have always been the voice and vote of a minority…*Poetry* has shown an unflagging courtesy to a lot of old fools and fogies whom I should have told to go to hell tout pleinement and bonnement…Had *Poetry* been my instrument I should never have permitted the deletion of certain fine English words from poems where they rang well and soundly. Neither would I have felt it necessary tacitly to comply with the superstition that the Christian religion is indispensable, or that it had always existed, or that its existence is ubiquitous, or irrevocable, or eternal…[Miss Monroe] is faced with the practical problem of circulating a magazine in a certain peculiar milieu, which thing being so, I have nothing but praise for the way she has done it. But the magazine does not express my convictions…I can not
believe that the mere geographical expanse of America will produce of itself excellent writing…There is no misanthropy in a thorough contempt for the mob. (Pound \textit{Little Review} May 1917)

Ellen Williams argues that Pound's disaffection with \textit{Poetry} was primarily a financial consideration, and that he abandoned the magazine when its funds began to dry up. She indicates his previous eagerness to associate with the short-lived journal \textit{Smart Set} in 1913, which commanded higher contributors' rates. Opines Williams, "\textit{Poetry} was a cash box improbably made available in Chicago, where neither poetry creation nor the enlightened understanding of poetry was to be expected. This cash box he felt was his by right of creative superiority, and he used it until it ran out of funds" (Ellen Williams 213).

While there may have been some truth to this assertion, it should be noted that Pound did argue against the lower contributors’ rates in spite of the fact that he, personally, continued to be paid the high rate he’d always commanded; and it cannot be disputed that Pound put a great deal of intellectual and creative energy into the magazine, beyond what Monroe could afford in terms of compensation. Still, it’s clear that by 1917 Pound was growing increasingly frustrated with Monroe’s editorial choices, and was actively looking for another venue more amenable to his tastes and aesthetic commitments. He had attempted to make \textit{Poetry} his “instrument”—but had failed in doing so. And his participation in the workings of the magazine became more and more limited until, in 1919, it stopped completely.

1.4: Another Voice: Alfred Kreymborg’s \textit{Others}
Ellen Williams points to Scofield Thayer’s revivified *Dial* as the cause of *Poetry’s* decline, arriving in 1920 to steal the attentions of “most of the major new poets” (Ellen Williams 221). However, *Poetry’s* first important competitor for the attentions of the avant-garde appeared much earlier. In 1915, Alfred Kreymborg began a short journal called *Others*, a short, initially self-published monthly collection. Its title implies the extent to which *Poetry* had, on the one hand, managed to establish an identifiable movement in new poetry, and on the other, become the “establishment” of that very movement. *Others* formed a compelling alternative to what may have seemed like Harriet Monroe’s monopoly on the new work (although as Pound would have argued, *Poetry* published much that was not the new work as well, perhaps to its detriment).

In the beginning, *Others* was a brief, simple journal, containing only poetry, without much editorializing. It contained only free verse, and though it was distinctly less polished than its predecessor, it adhered much more strongly to the tenets of new/modern poetry, to the *vers libre*, than did *Poetry*; nowhere in *Others* do we find the more sentimental, traditional offerings that Monroe continued to publish. Still, from its first volume, *Others* distinguished itself by offering poems by a few of the already-recognized leaders of the new poetry: number two of the first volume, August 1915, contained Wallace Stevens’ “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” while number three of that volume first published T. S. Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady.” In parallel to *Poetry’s* early promotion of Ezra Pound’s Imagist agenda, Pound appeared in October 1915 to introduce a small group of poets who wrote free verse to be danced and recited, the “choric school”:
“Remembering how great an effect *Al' entrade del tens clar* and the later dance song (it was such music that sent folk dancing from Provence to the far north country) have had on our European metric and poesy, I was at once interested and excited by the possibility which their work has, a possibility of reanimating our verse…At any rate the dance basis is fundamental in much early poetry” (Pound, *Others* 1.4).  

November 1915 of *Others* was gleefully prefaced by the following excerpt from J. B. Kerfoot, a critic at *Life* magazine:

> “Others” is the name of a new little monthly ‘magazine of new verse,’ published under Alfred Kreymborg at Grantwood, New Jersey ($1.50 per year)…They are among the live things being done in America just now. Perhaps you are unfamiliar with this ‘new poetry’ that is called ‘revolutionary.’ Perhaps you’ve heard that it is queer and have let it go at that. Perhaps if you tried it you’d find that a side of you that has been sleeping would come awake again. It is worth the price of a Wednesday matinee to find out. By the way, the new poetry *is* revolutionary. It is the expression of a democracy of feeling rebelling against an aristocracy of form. (Kerfoot *Others* 1.5: 73)

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6 In spite of Pound’s introduction, the Choric School received little notice and exerted relatively little influence, especially when compared to the (arguably) short-lived but nonetheless much celebrated Imagist group. Part of this failure to flourish may have been due to the fact that the Choric poems simply did not translate to the page: many of them were childishly rhymed, simple verses distinguished only by their juxtaposition to the dancing poets who could not be represented within *Others*’ simple format. Consider Hester Saintsbury’s “Spring: A Ballet to Words Danced by Five Dancers, Three Girls, and Two Children”: “Earth like a butterfly / Leaps in gold / From its chrysalis old / And stiff and cold” (Saintsbury 56). A selection of poems by John Rodker, which read more or less as a set of stage directions for “Columbine”, “Harlequin” and “Pierrot”, offers the most interest of the group.
Again, the rhetoric implies a particularly American, even patriotic, brand of avant-garde writing: a “democracy of feeling rebelling against an aristocracy of form”. Kerfoot’s review goes a long way toward establishing the extent to which the “new poetry” had infiltrated popular culture. Pound’s rhetoric had taken hold; the American “revolution” had begun. And Alfred Kreymborg, for one, celebrated the popular recognition.

As *Others* developed, it matured. A scheme of guest editors, including William Carlos Williams and Helen Hoyt, was introduced in 1916. Williams’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” appeared in *Others* of December 1917, and Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, and Orrick Johns became frequent contributors. The February 1918 issue was devoted to dramatic literature, featuring Djuna Barnes’ “A Passion Play.” By 1919, *Others* had adopted a hand-drawn cover with the motto “The old expressions are with us always and there are always others.” But July 1919 was *Others*’ last issue, edited again by William Carlos Williams, introduced by Williams’ half-serious polemic:

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7 A few notes on the guest-edited numbers: Williams’ first issue as editor of *Others* in July 1916 was entitled, perplexingly, “A Competitive Number.” August 1916 was initially planned as “A Chicago Number,” to be edited by Maxwell Bodenheim, but the issue was ultimately edited by Alfonso Guillen Zelaya, a Honduran poet. It contained South and Central American poems translated from the Spanish. A dual issue was planned, to be called *Otros!* and published in Honduras, presenting the work of North American new poets translated into Spanish. Helen Hoyt’s issue, “A Woman’s Number,” appeared in September 1916. Hoyt introduced the issue energetically: “We have yet to hear what woman will tell of herself, and where can she tell more intimately, more immediately, than in poetry? If only she is able to be sincere enough; and rather brave!” Oddly, Alfred Kreymborg diminishes Hoyt’s intentions, and the entire issue, by inserting the condescending “In other words, it is time woman played troubadour!” to the title page (*Others* 2.9: 54). The issue opens, incidentally, with a poem by Harriet Monroe.
Others has come to an end. I object to bringing out another issue after this one. Others is not enough. It has grown inevitably to be a lie...I object to its puling 4x6 dimension. I object to its yellow cover, its stale legend. Everything we have ever done or can do under these conditions is being done now by any number of other MAGAZINES OF POETRY! Others has been blasted out of existence. We must have a new conception from the bottom up or I will not touch it. (Williams Others 5.6: 3)

Williams’ witticisms tell us a good deal about the state of the avant-garde in American poetry at that time: the rhetoric was not only familiar, but had become available for irony. The movement had already become self-reflective and self-reflexive, with an identifiable register that could be, recognizably, invoked.

Williams also appends a “SUPPLEMENT” to the end of the issue, in which he blasts everything from Margaret Anderson’s Little Review (another, perhaps less serious, magazine of the period, hoping to present its version of the new poetry) to the Dial to Amy Lowell. He takes on Ezra Pound and the question of the “American” strain of new poetry:

If it must come to that I prefer Ezra Pound to anyone...He at least went abroad rather than do something worse. He went because he HAD to. It was too easy to remain in this country. I wish he were here today. He was not always dead and so HE CANNOT BE DEAD NOW...I want Ezra Pound in this country because coated over as it may be he has INSIGHT into this brain. (Williams Others 5.6: 31)

Considering the difficult nature of Williams’ own correspondence with Pound on the subject, this is high praise.

1.5: Into Anthologies: Pound, Lowell, and Kreymborg
As previously mentioned, *Poetry* gave rise to another strategy that would become typical to later generations of the American avant-garde: the development of anthologies that attempted to capture the “essence” of the movements that first appeared in the pages of a periodical. The two (arguably) most important *Poetry*-affiliated anthologies (*

\textit{Des Imagistes} \textit{and} *The Catholic Anthology*) were spearheaded and edited by Ezra Pound; one (*

\textit{Some Imagist Poets}* \textit{was edited and published by Amy Lowell, in an attempt to promote her own version of imagism (or “Amygism,” as Pound would call it). For his part, Alfred Kreymborg also published an anthology entitled *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* in 1916, based on selections from his journal of the same name.}

Each of these anthologies tries to present its own version of the best or most interesting groupings of the new poetry and new poets, and there is a definitively competitive tone between them. As we shall see, we might read *Some Imagist Poets* as an answer to *Des Imagistes*, and the *Catholic Anthology* as an answer to/dismissal of Lowell’s efforts. If a periodical is a record of a continuing literary movement or set of movements, an anthology is an attempt to distill the work of the periodical, to clarify and crystallize aesthetic alliances: in fact, to solidify the conversations and interactions within a small community of writers. This debate is expressive of the rapid turnover of avant-garde sentiment, of the dizzying speed with which the new poetry becomes the establishment, an antagonistic cycle turned inward.

Pound’s *Des Imagistes* was the first of these four to appear in America, published by Albert and Charles Boni in New York, 1914. When held against the
contemporary trend of prefacing anthologies with long mission statements or manifestoes, *Des Imagistes* is remarkable for its brevity and simplicity: no editorial word interferes, save an epigraph from the Greek: “And she also was of Sikilia and was gay in the valleys of Aetna, and knew the Doric singing” (*Des Imagistes* 2). This simplicity is deceptive: in these lines Pound is able to identify his aesthetic project, clarify the Imagiste alliance with ancient Greek poetry, and set the stage for many of the textual references and allusions. It also establishes an Old World connection—as opposed to the more aggressively American colloquial style then coming into fashion—that is borne out throughout the text.

The volume opens with a number of short verses by Richard Aldington and H. D., whose diction gives clear evidence of Pound’s preferences and influence. Consider Aldington’s “Beauty Thou Hast Hurt Me Overmuch”: “Where wert thou born / O thou woe / That consumesst my life? / Whither comest thou?” (Aldington, *Des Imagistes* 13) The stylistic difference between this stilted, archaic register and that of the more well-known later Imagist works—say, Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow” or Pound’s “At a Station in the Metro”—is striking. The way the volume opens says much about Pound’s vision of the Imagiste movement, its roots and most important representations: Aldington and H. D., longtime friend and collaborators in the Imagiste project, are followed by F. S. Flint, Skipwith Cannell, a single poem by Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, James Joyce, and then Pound himself and a long poem by Ford Madox Hueffer. Pound’s own selections are more restrained: he offers several of his Chinese-inspired
epigrammatic poems, including “Fan-Piece for Her Imperial Lord” and the
exemplary “Liu Ch’e”:

    The rustling of the silk is discontinued,
    Dust drifts over the courtyard,
    There is no sound of footfall, and the leaves
    Scurry into heaps and lie still,
    And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:

    A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

   (Pound, Des Imagistes 44)

The anthology’s final selections are Allen Upward’s and John Cournos’; they are
what would come to be called “prose poems” or “lyric essays,” a style that would
be much imitated by later generations of avant-garde poets.

    Poetry did offer a review of Des Imagistes, by Alice Corbin Henderson, in
its October 1914 number; it makes the alliances between the journal and the
anthology even more obvious as it celebrates the Imagiste project:

    Imagism is essentially a graphic art, and, like the
    finest etching, print or wood-cut, depends upon a
    highly cultivated state of appreciation in the observer.
    It is not an art of the naïve or unsophisticated.
   (Henderson, Poetry 5.1, 1914: 38)

    Amy Lowell’s Some Imagist Poets was published to much more fanfare by
the more reputable Houghton Mifflin and Company, and reviewed by Harriet
Monroe in Poetry of June 1915. Lowell’s attempt to wrest Imagisme
(Francophone “Imagisme,” for Pound, but according to Lowell, the Americanized
“imagism”) from Pound’s control and present a New World version was not
surprising, given her personal frustrations with Pound and her own wholly
American agenda. In the issue that published Henderson’s review of Des
Imagistes, Monroe also presented Amy Lowell’s scolding essay on “Nationalism in Art”:

American and English critics do love to talk about American art. They tell us just what it ought to be about, and how it should be presented…that our own critics should persist in demanding a narrow and purely surface “Americanism” is more astonishing. To their minds “Americanism” would seem to consist of a mixture of trade-unionism, slums…polyethnic factories, and limitless prairies peopled by heroic cowboys… Let us show a little more trust in our artists, let us believe that they know what is good for themselves better than we do. And when an American artist, with all the force and vitality of his go-ahead American nature, braves the scorn of the critics and lays a beautiful pomegranate before us, let us not weep or scold because it is not a rice pudding. (Lowell, Poetry 5.1 1914: 35-36)

Lowell’s metaphors betray a similarly complicated attitude toward the Old World: she manages to simultaneously argue for a purely American art of “force and vitality” while using the pomegranate—a fruit not at all indigenous to America, but in fact specifically Greek—as its symbol.

Lowell’s anthology itself generated more hard feelings on the part of Harriet Monroe and Poetry: Lowell, it seems, neglected to credit Poetry with first presentation and discovery of many of the poems and poets in its pages; even more egregious in Monroe’s eyes, Pound, Williams, Hueffer, and Joyce are all left out of Lowell’s selection. Monroe’s review was colored by her resentment:

Although Poetry is ignored, in the preface to this volume, our readers will recognize the finest entries of its poets—covering thirty of the book’s seventy-seven printed pages—as having appeared in this magazine, many of them during our first year when no other publisher would look at them. It is pleasing to see so
honorable a house as the great Boston firm
[Houghton, Mifflin and Company] falling into line
behind us, but we should appreciate the compliment
more deeply if our primacy were more definitely
acknowledged. Nor do readers of Poetry need that
information of the imagistic creed and technique
which is now, in scarcely recognizable form, going the
rounds of a bewildered press. (Monroe, *Poetry* 6.3
1915: 150)

This break would continue to intensify, leading in large part to Pound’s—and
*Poetry’s*—distancing themselves from what Imagisme had become.

Pound’s *Catholic Anthology 1914-1915* was in many ways a break from
the Imagiste agenda that had come to feel too restrictive to contain all that the
new poetry had to offer. The title confirms Pound’s intention to be more
“catholic”—inclusive, comprehensive—with the new anthology, and offers as
clarification only the years that it would cover. Certainly the text was anything but
truly catholic; instead, it can be read as a partial attempt to present a more
focused and selective version of the new poetry than what was regularly
appearing in *Poetry*. Even so, *Catholic Anthology* leaned heavily on poets and
poems that had first come to prominence in *Poetry’s* pages. Appearing only a
year after *Des Imagistes*, *Catholic Anthology* was published *not* in the United
States, but by Elkin Mathews of London. Its pages open with a poem by Yeats
(“The Scholars”) and contain (among other things) long selections from Eliot
(including “Prufrock”), Orrick Johns, Alfred Kreymborg, Edgar Lee Masters (from
“The Spoon River Anthology”), Williams, Pound, Rodker, and one poem by
Harriet Monroe.
Kreymborg’s *Others* inaugurated the practice of printing reviews in April 1916 with Maxwell Bodenheim’s review of *Catholic Anthology*. Interestingly, the review does not place much emphasis on the editorial organization of the collection as a whole, instead preferring to let the quality of the text be decided by its individual poems:

> Someone with a delightful sense of futuristic contrast arranged the poem sequence of *The Catholic Anthology*, placed W. B. Yeats next to T. S. Eliot, and Alice Corbin beside Orrick Johns. The poets should have been linked in simple alphabetical order, or placed in fairly friendly groups. But that is a small flaw—the anthology lives or dies through its content. (Bodenheim, *Others* 2.4 1916: 210)

This approach is surprisingly traditional, though it’s true that the structure of *Catholic Anthology* does in some ways appear to be the most catholic thing about it. All in all, the text reflects Pound’s increasingly focused and elite tastes, presenting a selection of the best-known and most successful poets and poems of the years it represents.

When *Others* published its own anthology, *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1916), the poets were arranged simply, alphabetically. The only obvious editorial comments were in the appearance of the journal’s epigraph—“The old expressions are with us always, and there are always others”—and on the copyright page, a very pointed “PRINTED IN AMERICA.” As *Des Imagistes* and *Catholic Anthology* had, the anthology showed preference to the longtime editors and contributors to the pages of its foundational periodical, printing, for example, only one poem from T. S. Eliot.
“(Portrait of a Lady”, which *Others* had first published) alongside eight of Maxwell Bodenheim’s. Ezra Pound is represented with six short poems, while Kreymborg merits thirteen.

The *Others* anthology is much longer and more inclusive than either of Pound’s offerings, including alongside such usual offerings as Williams, Pound, Marianne Moore, Kreymborg, John Lowker, and Mina Loy, poets like Alice Gross (with her bewilderingly titled “Herm-Aphrodite-Us”), Douglas Goldring, and Ferdinand Reyher. It closes with William Zorach's “The Dead”, which placement may be read as a hint of editorial comment on the insidious nature of influence:

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The dead are walking;
I hear the scraping of their shoes upon the floor,
The great rooms echo with their hollow voices;
I hear the creaking of their shoes upon the stairs,
I see them slanting toward their graves.

The dead are always cold,
I feel the windows rattle as they pass,
The dead are walking in the road
I hear the wailing of children as they pass
Of little children dragged along by the dead.

The hills are black,
The moon is a cold white,
It is like a great mouth opening to swallow the dead.
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(Zorach, *Others: An Anthology* 152)

In spite of the anthology’s admittedly alphabetical organization, this poem is a fascinating and probably carefully-selected closing piece of an anthology dedicated to “New Verse.” Its greatest interest lies in the last stanza: so spare, so frankly visual, so linguistically colloquial, it openly threatens the absorption of the old (Old World) ways into the “great mouth” of the new world poetics.
The origins of the contemporary anthology of avant-garde poetry are extremely complicated, extending as they do not only between poets, publishers, editors, and benefactors, but also between friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and other more or less purely social relationships. The foundationally antagonistic (a la Poggioli) stance of any avant-garde poet or artist ensures that the avant-garde remains a site of much conflict, change, and rejection, a playing-field for competition, revision, and struggle.

Ezra Pound remains a highly influential figure of the early American poetic avant-garde, both for his aesthetic contributions and for the ways in which he modeled the relationship between the avant-garde poet and the editors, periodicals, and anthologies which would come to be the most important vehicles of the new work. The most influential figures of the American poetic avant-garde—the “avant-garde” being, as it is, more of a social and community-based construction than it is a coherent set of aesthetic commonalities—are not the poets, but the editors and promoters (many of them poets, as well) who propagate and perpetuate change through the production of representative texts and manifestoes in the form of anthologies, publications, and, later, blogs and listservs, organizing more or less disparate individuals and cells into movements.
What is a sentence. A sentence is not a fair. A fair is followed by partake. This does make a sentence.
Think how everybody follows me.
--Gertrude Stein, from
How to Write

...what makes poetry poetry and philosophy
philosophy is largely a tradition of thinking and writing,
a social matrix of publications, professional
associations, audience; more, indeed, facts of history
and social convention than intrinsic necessities of the
“medium” or “idea” of either one. So such an inquiry
will end up being into the social meaning of specific
modes of discourse, a topic that is both a stylistic
resource for the writing of poetry and a content for
philosophy.

--Charles Bernstein, from “Writing
and Method”, Content’s Dream
217

The sense and non-sense of Gertrude Stein’s experimental work has both
attracted and stymied critical and readerly attention with its generic convolution,
semantic play, and emotional riddling. Since the stubborn narrative opacity of
much of her work—excepting, possibly, Three Lives and The Autobiography of
Alice B. Toklas—resists efforts at conventional explication (as examples of
realism, naturalism, Imagism, or other modernist techniques), Stein’s readers
have been forced to understand her in other ways. Her poetry resembles prose,
her prose resembles poetry, and both not only exhibit but enact their own philosophical and critical projects, much in the way that Charles Bernstein would later describe “Writing and Method,” excerpted at length above.

We have seen that the poetic and promotional strategies of the American modernists Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams have provided important models for American avant-garde poetic theory and practice throughout the 20th century. However, Gertrude Stein is perhaps the most persistent stylistic influence on the contemporary inheritors of the techniques and preoccupations exhibited by the avant-garde phase of American modernism through the Language movement. This chapter explores some of the lines of influence of Stein’s aesthetics, as well as the essential optimism of her experimental writing and her own particular brand of the pedagogical tendency—specifically, in How To Write—so common to modernist and poet-modernist avant-garde works, journals, collections, and anthologies. In doing so, she also, and perhaps most importantly, provides a model for a type of poetic philosophy, poetic essay, or poetic criticism, that we can see developing and flourishing in the hybrid works of the Language writers and their contemporary successors.

Stein refused the conventional markers of the literary—symbol, metaphor, allusion, and the like—in favor of a quasi-scientific, quasi-objective approach not so much as to the objects of language, but to language itself. It’s evident that in the strain of avant-garde work that began in the 1970s with the Language writing and continues into present experimental poetic practice, Stein’s work has found
its fittest and most grateful readers and students. Whether or not we are able to agree with Richard Kostelanetz that “we can see, by now, that no other twentieth-century American author has had as much influence as Stein,” it’s easy to support his assertion that “none influenced his or her successors in as many ways” (Kostelanetz xxx).

Stein’s publication history diverges widely from some of her contemporaries, in that her reputation was, by and large, not made by her inclusion in the day’s poetry journals or through the impassioned promotional efforts of a Pound or a Harriet Monroe. She was not involved in the production of, nor was her writing included in, the fashionable anthologies of the day; nor did she consciously affiliate herself with any literary “isms.” (Her early association with cubism excepted, as it involved making literary that which had previously been reserved for the visual arts.) An expatriate, she maintained a discrete circle of friends and admirers, to which Pound was occasionally admitted. Stein is perhaps most famous for the literary luminaries who attended her salon and who were dramatized in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, but unlike Pound, had no mercenary motives for her literary activities, no journal to fund, no prizes to award.

In fact, Stein went largely unpublished until the great success of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, published in 1933 and marketed in the United States as a gossipy literary memoir. In his review of The Autobiography in The New Republic, Edmund Wilson comments somewhat snidely in a discussion of Stein’s Paris salon, “she is…herself a writer who has had a very hard time to get
published and who has never yet had the recognition to which she considers herself entitled" (Wilson 246). Her earliest journal publication was of a couple of short pieces in Alfred Stieglitz’ *Camera Work; Tender Buttons* (1914) and *Useful Knowledge* (1928) appeared in New York in small and unsuccessful editions; and she contributed her own funds to the publication of a number of her books at other, more cautious houses (as she had previously done with *Three Lives* in 1909). *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and the extremely successful American book tour that followed it, brought Stein widespread celebrity, and inspired American publishing houses like Random House to reprint many of her earlier works, as well as to pick up her new manuscripts. She was fifty-nine years old.

2.1: Influence and Critical Approaches to Gertrude Stein

Avoiding Gertrude Stein is, perhaps, one of the more dangerous impulses in contemporary literary criticism. Richard Kostelanetz, longtime Stein scholar, editor, and anthologist, has this to say about the ways in which her work has been neglected and misunderstood:

The principal reason for [the] continued incomprehension is that her experiments in writing were conducted apart from the major developments in modern literature. Neither a naturalist nor a surrealist, she had no interest in either the representation of social reality or the weaving of symbols, no interest at all in myth, metaphor, allegory, literary allusions, uncommon vocabulary, synoptic cultural critiques, shifts in points of view...she was an empiricist... (Kostelanetz xiii)
In short, Stein kept her writing, if not her person, very much apart from the main currents of modernism, even its most ostensibly “new” or “avant-garde”; and the result was a body of work both alienating to and alienated from the mainstream literary audience until the literary and commercial success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* occurred in 1933.

It’s worth noting that critical attention to Stein’s more experimental work has increased significantly since the 1980s, when the work of the Language writers and other similarly-minded avant-garde poets were beginning to influence the critical landscape. It is fairly easy to trace lines of influence from Gertrude Stein’s work, especially her more “difficult” projects such as *The Making of Americans* (1925), *How To Write* (1931) and *The Geographical History of America* (1936), into later generations of experimental writers looking to develop or refine the signifying process. It is critical territory not entirely uncharted: Marjorie Perloff has made much of the double influence of Stein and Wittgenstein on language writing, and in the introduction to his collection of essays on Stein, Peter Quartermain describes “the ‘line’ of American poetry running from Gertrude Stein through Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivists to the Language Writers” (Quartermain 1) as if this chain of influence were a given.

Quartermain places Stein and Objectivist-affiliated poets like Louis Zukofsky, Charles Oppen, and others, on parallel tracks historically, if not geographically: while contemporaries such as Pound and Stein chose expatriate life in Europe, the Objectivist poets stayed, for the most part, in the United
States. He offers a highly political version of the Objectivist project, exhibiting the characteristic optimism of the avant-garde reader, poet, and critic:

To call a poem an object is not to see it in the traditional art sense of “masterpiece”: aloof, irreproachable, transcendent, separate from our lives; but to see it as an autonomous object, an identifiable thing that we can look at in the world, and respond to—much, perhaps, as we might respond to a chair or a desk: something of use, but something whose existence is nevertheless independent of or goes beyond its use. By no means, then, “art for art’s sake.” Chairs and desks are so heavily contextualized in our culture that it is extremely difficult to see them. (Quartermain 2)

This approach is useful in considering the aims of some Objectivist writings, but it is ultimately too pat to be applied to Stein. Quartermain’s object-based reading has much in common with the early tenets of Imagism in its prioritization of direct presentation of the thing. The rest of Quartermain’s analysis, which centers on the piece “Book,” from Tender Buttons, explores in some detail and much more clarity the more well-trodden ground of Stein’s treatment of language and books as the objects of her poetry/study.

Stein’s partial disregard for signification in favor of an intense relationship with the external structures of language is a common theme in critical approaches to her work. Quartermain calls it “resistant to institutionalized power and meaning…indeed what Yeats called for, art” (Quartermain 43). This very hopeful conclusion invests Stein’s work with the transformative potential so tempting to the avant-garde: language itself offering a way out of the institutional
morass. In her study of “indeterminacy” in experimental poetry since Rimbaud, Marjorie Perloff argues that “Stein’s syntax enacts the gradually changing present of human consciousness, the instability of emotion and thought. The gap between signifier and signified is repeatedly emphasized, a gap that leaves room for continuous verbal play” (Perloff 98-99).

Perloff’s characterization of Stein’s language-play, her willingness to disrupt the purely representational intent of language through “the gap between signifier and signified,” is representative of a certain brand of Stein criticism which emphasizes the “gap” in the Derridean sense as a space of almost limitless potential for play, imagination, energetic exchange, and freedom. Still, as Randa Dubnick points out, “[Stein’s] writing almost never is nonrepresentational. She never really abandons subject matter” (Dubnick 30). For Dubnick, Stein’s originality is found in the purposefully “obscure” style of her two main phases, prose and poetry; she parallels the development of these phases with the analytic and synthetic phases of cubism, respectively. (Perloff herself takes issue with most attempts to equate Stein’s style with abstract or Cubist art.) Furthermore, Dubnick is unable to resist the urge to apply the rhetoric of consciousness-transformation into Stein’s work, particularly her poetry. The synthetic/poetry stage of Stein’s artistic development is marked by “a change from mimesis of external reality to mimesis of the intersection of the present moment of consciousness with an object…no longer focused on the universals of

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8 Perloff identifies “the poetics of indeterminacy” as one of two major strains of literary Modernism: the first is the Symbolist, the second the “anti-Symbolist mode of indeterminacy or ‘undecidability,’ of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of the Illuminations” (Perloff vii).
experience, but rather on the process of experiencing each moment in the present tense as it intersects with consciousness” (Dubnick 28-29).

Jonathan Levin places Stein’s genre-confounding style within a tradition of writing infused with the energetics of what Levin calls “transition,” running from Ralph Waldo Emerson through William James and Henry James. Levin comments that for Emerson and those operating in his tradition:

Writing does not reflect or correspond to a world of things, but rather contributes to and extends the active processes and energies that flow through and thereby constitute the world. Americans have not only written about energies, processes, movements, transitions, and transformations, but have also been subject to the recurring dream that they can make their writing the literal embodiment of these vital forces. (Levin 2)

We can see in Stein’s work a version of this optimism, so faithfully carried out in the work of later generations of American avant-garde poets. The didactic preoccupation with consciousness-transformation we have discussed earlier in this study is, in fact, not unique to Ezra Pound, language writing, the contemporary avant-garde or the so-called post-avant; the endowment of language with spiritual and transformative properties can, according to Levin, be traced back through Stein and her modernist contemporaries, through Henry James and Williams James, to Emerson and perhaps even to Emerson’s studies in Eastern philosophy. Levin opines that this obsession with motion and expansion is particularly American: “Stein’s cowboys, movies, and detective stories constitute a virtual iconography of perpetually circulating American
energy” (Levin 150). For Levin, the energy of transition motivates and transforms the texts of literary modernism.

Other critics have located the source of Stein’s subversive potential in her feminism. Marianne DeKoven’s 1991 study of gender and modernism, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism*, emphasizes the abruptness and violence in Stein’s more experimental work, reading it as “a fear of punishment for the unequivocal assertiveness of her program for that release of the twentieth-century revolution of the word” (DeKoven 198). She finds an ambivalence and anxiety expressed in the vocabulary of *Tender Buttons*, at once deeply linked to this fear and offering a position of power against it.

But most instructive for our purposes are DeKoven’s remarks about modernist poetics and form, which are worth reprinting at some length:

> Early modernist narrative represented the promise/threat of social renewal/destruction offered by the revolutionary horizon of the twentieth century in the modernist formal practices it invented. While the writers of early modernist narrative represented in their fiction their irresolvable ambivalence toward that revolutionary horizon, the self-conscious, self-defining Anglo-American modernists of the early twentieth century, with the exemplary exception of Woolf, repudiated revolutionary social change altogether…largely because reaction was compatible with their program for cultural renewal based on a revivification of the supposedly integrated or culturally authentic artistic modes of the distant past. The revolutionary impulse of modernism came to reside entirely in the realm of form. It is in poetry, or poetic prose, that form by itself can most readily bear the weight of so much cultural and political responsibility. (DeKoven 188)
Although DeKoven’s accusations of reactionary nostalgia are ostensibly leveled at modernist writers of fiction, it’s difficult to avoid fitting Pound and T. S. Eliot into the model: their innovations in form were matched by their hyperintellectualism and their reification of certain aspects of literary tradition. (Of course, both Eliot and Pound worked in opposition to the then-current habit of imitating mediocre eighteenth-century verse, but their criticism, especially Eliot’s, betrayed their reactionary impulses, longing for a return to, for example, the poetry of the Greek ancients.) Gertrude Stein presents a sharp alternative to this impulse, speeding the agonistic process: while Eliot and Pound worked to reject the traditional forms of popular verse, Stein was actually working against contemporary avant-garde forms, and is thus a more classically avant-garde figure.

2.2: Stein and the Pedagogy of the Avant-Garde

As I have mentioned, the impulse to instruct is crucial to the group consciousness and group identification of the self-styled avant-garde from the modernist period to the contemporary one. This pedagogical bent is expressed through periodicals devoted to “the new” (like *Poetry* and *Others*) and anthologies (from Pound’s Imagist anthologies to the series of Language writing-based anthologies discussed in Chapter Two). It is also clearly apparent in two texts of poetic prose which double, or masquerade, as instructional manuals: Pound’s *ABC of Reading* and Stein’s *How To Write*. Pound’s text is actually fairly straightforward: it reads like a primer, it contains clear and practical instruction, and in spite of its then-unconventional content, in form it is familiar to any
schoolchild. Not so How To Write, which helps to establish Stein’s extraordinarily influential formal innovation.

I will also consider Charles Bernstein’s collection of essays My Way as an important later example of this tradition of poetic criticism, as well as another, more contemporary effort to marry poetic practice and poetic pedagogy and explication: the Technique and Presentation volumes of the two-volume set O-blek 12: Writing from the New Coast. Stein’s text, the earliest of the four texts, exemplifies the synthesis of poetry, prose and philosophy that would come to be a hallmark of avant-garde American writing in the late-20th and early 21st centuries. This incorporation of criticism into poetry (and vice versa) is, for these poets, a particular method of developing and maintaining a reading (and writing) community.

How To Write is remarkable, either for its ability to predict the direction of the American avant-garde, or for the profound influence it had on that direction. Its publication history bookends the shift in the way the text has been adopted: first published in 1931 in Paris, in an edition of only 1,000 copies, the most recent edition was published in 1995 by Sun and Moon Press, a successful printer of Language-affiliated and other experimental poetry, and edited by Douglas Messerli, once-editor of the 1984 anthology “Language” Poetries discussed in Chapter Two. The 1995 issue is described thus on its back cover: “Stein lucidly explains her thoughts on writing everything from a sentence to a syllable, from the paragraph to whole grammars” (How To Write cover blurb).
As tempting as this formulation may be (though it’s equally tempting to read “lucidly explains her thoughts” tongue-in-cheek), the actuality of Stein’s text resists it. It is as easy to oversimplify this text as it is to overanalyze it, as easy to dismiss it as nonsense as to perform an impossibly detailed close reading. Take, for example, the following passage from the chapter/section entitled “Sentences”:

If they wish that they. This is a sentence if they are alike. Now at a gain. If they had not meant all or a door. Would could is assigning a wall nut. A walnut can be a saint.

(Stein, How To Write 226)

Here we find a number of characteristic techniques: the slippery pronouns (“they”, which appears to refer differently each time it appears), the wordplay (“a gain”/”again”, “a door”/”adore”, “wall nut”/”walnut”), the apparent non-sequiturs and unexpected juxtaposition. But these techniques are so persistent, so relentlessly applied in all grammatical, structural, and narrative circumstances throughout the text and in so much of Stein’s work, that they almost insist on being treated as red herrings.

What would happen to a “reading,” for analysis or for pleasure, that chased down every one of Stein’s tropes, language games, figures, and effects? Perhaps the impulse to characterize some of the most distinctive features of Stein’s text as “red herrings” is unnecessarily reductive, but then almost any approach to Stein is reductive. The texts absorb almost any interpretation and reflect any reader’s preoccupations. They manage to be both completely opaque and endlessly productive, infuriatingly childish and impossibly complex.
So, the question remains: what is the utility and appeal of a text such as *How To Write*? What are its strategies, and what are its aims? Does it accomplish those aims, and if so, how? It is structured more or less after a composition manual, with titles like “Sentences and Paragraphs,” “A Grammarian,” and “Finally George A Vocabulary of Thinking.” If the text is indeed pedagogical, then what is the subject and who are the students? Is the text meant to be an exploration of thought-processes themselves, a “vocabulary of thinking”? Or is the whole thing a trick, a riddle, leading the reader simply deeper and deeper into engagement with its material? Can it teach us anything more than how to read Gertrude Stein? Is it possible to describe the nature of Gertrude Stein’s insight into the workings of language, and what is the relationship between her insight and the form she pioneered?

The preceding list of questions is unforgiving, and any single approach to reading Stein is inadequate to answer them all. However, though it is important to mention that Stein’s text precedes the wide influence of the New Critical approach and was surely not written to invite such sustained, detail-oriented analysis, it is instructive to see what happens when we attempt a close reading of the text. One of the more approachable sections of *How To Write* is “Sentences and Paragraphs”, subtitled “A Sentence is not emotional a paragraph is” (Stein, *How To Write* 19). That section opens thus:

> Dates of what they bought.

> They will be ready to have him. We think so.

> He looks like a young man grown old. That is a sentence that they could use.
I was overcome with remorse. It was my fault that my wife did not have a cow. This sentence they cannot use.

A repetition of prettiness makes it repeated. With them looking.

A repetition of sweetness makes it not repeating but attractive and making soup and dreaming coincidences. The sentence will be saved. He raises his head and lifts it. A sentence is not whether it is beautiful. Beautiful is not thought without asking as it they are well able to be forgiving.

George Maratier in America.
The sexual life of Genia Berman.
A book of George Hugnet.
The choice of Eric Haulville.
The wealth of Henri d’Ursel.
The relief of Harry Horwood.
The mention of Walter Winterberg. The renown of Bernard Fay. The pleasure of prophecy concerning Rene Crevel. Titles are made of sentences without interruption. Sucking is dangerous. The danger of sucking.

With them.
In itself.
Within itself. A part of a sentence may be a sentence without their meaning. Think of however they went away.

It looks like a garden but he had hurt himself by accident.

Every sentence has a beginning. Will he begin.

Every sentence which has a beginning makes it be left more to them.

I return to sentences as a refreshment.

Howard opposes them less.

That is nice.

(Stein, HTW 21-22)

The passage reads like poetry, and its poetic features, particularly the strong anaphora, syntactic patterning, and semantic play, support the kind of line reading often applied to poetry. Again, however, too much attention to the particulars puts the reader in the frustrating position of mounting an endless analysis, and a pure close reading only confounds things further. There is no
“key” to the text, no single line that unlocks the rest; to return to Bruce Andrews, it is the “unreadable,” in the sense that “that which requires new readers, and teaches new readings” (Andrews 30). In the case of Stein’s experimental work, the most important effects reveal themselves as a result of accumulation: of anaphora, vocabulary, rhythmic play and wordplay. Effects that might otherwise be forgettable are intensified by repeated use, and the progress of the text does, indeed, instruct on the subject of its own reading. Its most important innovations are formal, as it models the synthesis of poetry, prose and criticism so essential to later generations of the American avant-garde.

When confronted with such a difficult text, the reader, naturally enough, begins to look for a way out. This “way out” may entail simple rejection, turning away from the page, dismissing or resisting any form of pleasure the text might bring. The more characteristic critical misstep, however, involves turning too closely toward the page and assigning to it too specific a project: the creation of a Kristevan mother-language, the celebration of or shame of lesbian eroticism, a detailed response to T. S. Eliot or Picasso. All this is not to say that close reading of Stein should be abandoned or that it should or can be avoided entirely. Difficulties notwithstanding, the technique forces the slowing-down of the reading process necessary to produce a sustained engagement with the specifics of the text and check the impulse to skim.

Recall the subtitle of “Sentences and Paragraphs”: “A Sentence is not emotional a paragraph is.” It is the cumulative qualities mentioned above which allow for emotion to be developed and conveyed at the paragraph level; a single
statement, then, does a different type of work. In this case, the basic function of the sentence is to present a relationship. The section opens with what is, essentially, an Imagist moment: “Dates of what they bought” is a snapshot of consumer goods, with the first appearance of the slippery plural pronouns that will serve as both object and narrator throughout the text. But the same structure is mirrored and repeated in “The sexual life of Genia Berman. / A book of George Hugnet. / The choice of Eric Haulville. / The wealth of Henri d’Ursel,” and so forth. The sentence introduces a dramatic moment or character in relationship, but it does not elaborate in a way that would allow for the accumulation of emotional impact.

The paragraph does the more “emotional” work; in fact, in “Sentences and Paragraphs” the paragraph is a particularly dangerous construction, always veering away from its foundational statement: a paragraph beginning “The mention of Walter Winterberg” closes “Sucking is dangerous. The danger of sucking.” Then, as if startled by her own physicality, the poet leaps out of the paragraph, offering next what is barely a sentence: “With them.” This retreat from paragraphs more or less out of control recurs throughout “Sentences and Paragraphs.” Another common move is the self-referential, as in:

> Now for a sentence. Welcome to hurry. That is either a sentence or part of a sentence if it is part of a sentence the sentence is he is welcome to hurry. Welcome it in itself a part of a sentence. She prefers them. I have told her where the place which is meant is. (Stein, HTW 22)
The process of accumulation, of description and of self-description, brings the paragraph to its apotheosis with the relational, emotional, plot-driven final sentence “I have have told her where the place which is meant is.”

The final pages of “Sentences and Paragraphs” offer something as close to a code for its reading as can be found in a Steinian text, with paragraphs containing the like: “What is a sentence. A sentence is a duplicate. An exact duplicate is depreciated. Why is a duplicated sentence not depreciated. Because it is a witness. No witnesses are without value” (Stein, *HTW* 32). This matter of “duplication”—such a characteristically Steinian technique—and “depreciation” applies the language of exchange, calling into question the entire process of analysis that the piece seems to require, with its overt or implied conclusions regarding its success and “value.” The sentence is a witness to language and emotion; it is both narrator and principal character, teaching its readers again and again how to respond to language and to the relationships and structures represented in language.

The creation of an esoteric text is always a community-building project; it distinguishes those who read it from those who do not, or cannot. A text like Stein’s, with its nod to pedagogy and the instructional mode, turns its readers into students and the reading-process into a classroom exercise. It is an important predecessor to the work of community orientation through consciousness-transformation of later avant-garde poets and writers.

**2.3: Poetry and Philosophy: Bernstein and Beyond**
Gertrude Stein is never mentioned in Charles Bernstein’s essay “The Revenge of the Poet-Critic, or The Parts Are Greater Than the Sum of the Whole”, from his 1999 volume of essays My Way. Yet her influence, and the influence of How To Write, is obvious. Certainly Bernstein is familiar with Stein’s work, whether Stein’s influence on this particular essay is conscious or unconscious; her influence on Language writing and American contemporary avant-garde poetic practice in general is uncontestable.

Consider the following correspondences: first, Bernstein’s essay’s hybrid form. The prose is polyvocal and lively: Bernstein puts on his professor cap and then trades it for a sort of aw-shucks persona (with a nod to T. S. Eliot): “break ‘em enough times you won’t have to learn ‘em, or the rules will have changed, or you will change them…who are you calling a verse? That’s not what I meant y’all, not what I meant at all” (Bernstein, My Way 3). Short poems of varying degrees of seriousness (such as “Don't Be So Sure (Don't Be Saussure)”) decorate the pages.

Bernstein quite seriously “proposes” a Steinian “modular essay form that allows for big jumps from paragraph to paragraph and section to section…it becomes possible to recombine the paragraphs to get another version of the essay—since the ‘argument’ is not dependent on the linear sequence” (Bernstein, My Way 7). He goes on to insist that

A poem should make its own experience…I tend to dislike readings where the poet defines every detail and reference of the work so that by the time you get to the poem it’s been reduced to an illustration of the anecdotes and explanations that preceded it. I figure if a reader or listener can’t make out a particular
reference or train of thought, that’s okay—it’s very much the way I experience things in everyday life. If the poem is at times puzzling or open-ended or merely suggestive, rather than explicit, maybe it gives readers or listeners more space for their own interpretations and imaginations. (Bernstein, *My Way* 9)

Bernstein simultaneously condemns certain types of opacity and embraces certain others, but this is a very clear example of the way the attitudes toward sense-making and reading so fully explored in *How To Write* have been fully explicated and even made mainstream in the language and preoccupations of the contemporary avant-garde.

Consider Bernstein’s treatment of “sentences and paragraphs” in the same essay:

I think of paragraphs as a series of extended remarks or improvisations on aphoristic cores. So you have these series of paragraphs that are semi-autonomous making up sections that are themselves serial...The idea is that the paragraphs could be shifted, and, more importantly, that space is left for new paragraphs to be inserted, something like leaving room for (more) thought. (Bernstein, *My Way* 7)

Bernstein is simply extending Stein’s treatment. The “space” he leaves between paragraphs is roughly equivalent to the function of repetition in *How To Write* and other texts of Stein’s experimental style. It opens up room for play, for “thought,” resonance, and multiplicity. Bernstein’s foundational “aphorisms” are Stein’s “sentences,” the concrete starting-points for emotional and linguistic experiment at the paragraph level.

In 1993 the avant-garde poetry journal *O-blek* published as its twelfth issue a double-volume set called *Writing From the New Coast*, in order to collect
work associated with the New Coast conference of poetry and poetics held at the University of Buffalo. One volume of the set, *Presentation*, contains the actual poems of conference participants; the second, *Technique*, is a collection of more or less poetic essays by many of those same poets on their technique, poetics, and practice.

In the introduction to *Technique*, Steve Evans evokes Stein in two ways. First, subtly: he refers to “the elective affinity between poetry and critical thought” as “an unbroken, if somewhat subterranean, tradition within American poetry” (Evans 9). Then, by citing Stein first in a list of the forerunners of the “oppositional tradition” in American poetry: “[her] generativity seems inexhaustible” (Evans 7). This opening paragraph of an essay by Raphael Rubenstein called “Error and After” says it all with its overtly Steinian style almost on a level with high-school parodies of her work:

> Sometimes reading these books they write or reading about these books they write makes me also want to write books and sometimes it makes me want to not write any books at all, not least any books like the books they write, which I sometimes read or read about. (Rubenstein 141)

The ways in which this piece mirrors Stein’s style barely need mentioning: repetition of vocabulary and diction, childish patterning, exploded sentences, and attempt to trace and present the thought process of the poet in all its fragmentation and endless reference. That such an obvious imitation should be presented in a volume devoted to the “new” is indicative of the extent to which Stein’s preferred textual mode, this hybrid of philosophy and poetry, poetics and
prose, informs and affects contemporary avant-garde practice. Can it be that Stein’s work is still so opaque, so little-understood, little-read, or simply misunderstood, that her strategies continue to feel new, even after 75 years of study?
The Lakotas do not write. They remember things by figures and symbols. A circle means a camp, and the sun, and the world. A circle with marks across it means the spider and a whirlwind. A square means the four winds, and the country of the Lakotas. A triangle means a tipi; triangles side by side mean mountains. A triangle with its base up means the people. A trident means going against. A straight line means a trail. A straight line with a head and points means a journey, a war party or hunting party. A diamond means water. There are many other figures which mean much.

(James Clifford, “Transcriptions”, 10)

In his chronicle of Donald Allen’s efforts to bring The New American Poetry 1945-1960 to print, Alan Golding and others describes a “re-emergence of a version of the late-1950s and early-1960s anthology wars” (Golding 8) in the world of avant-garde poetries circa 1998, when he published the essay in Contemporary Literature. Golding emphasizes the way hitherto suspect terms such as “avant-garde” and “mainstream” have begun to appear and be used widely in collections and anthologies of innovative poetries. The crux of the issue is again clearly expressed in Robert Duncan’s early suspicion of Allen’s anthology: would attempts to anthologize the “new” strip it of its political and poetic power by categorizing, labeling, and organizing it out of existence? The thrust of the “new” poetry, as seen in 1960, was a decisive refusal of all that
might be read as “academic” poetry: traditional, form-bound, Old-World, fearful and nostalgic in both form and content. And what could be more obviously academic than the process of organizing a movement into an anthology, with an introduction, something that looked suspiciously like a textbook?

In the slightly more specialized field of Language writing, we find a similar tension: how to anthologize a movement opposed at its very foundation to categorization and canonicity? The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, or Language, poets (or “Language Poets,” “Language writers,” or any of a number of more or less descriptive terms) pioneered, or attempted to pioneer, a radical willingness to engage with language on its own terms; that is, as material, divorced in many cases from logic and signification. Their desire to reject semantic linkages and insist instead on leaps of sound and sense that lay bare the structural instability of language and meaning-making can partially be found to originate in the postmodern attack on the perceived flaws of modernism, the choice to reject the modernist occupation with collage and juxtaposition and to accept, even embrace, an aesthetics founded on discontinuity, disjunction, and fragmentation. The jazz-based rhythms of the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond may have also had their influence, but Language writing does not work with language in conjunction with music, or in imitation of actual musical or vocal rhythms; in fact, it aspires to subvert or even erase the “natural” functions of language, or at least to disrupt our expectations of the natural.

The question of the function of language is to be found everywhere in poetic theory, and no less in the poetics of the avant-garde of any decade. The
usual questions emerge and reemerge: *What is language? What is it for? What does it do?* And the poets add, *What can it do?* Language writing seeks, in part, to divorce language from its own embodiment in speech, and in that way is the most decisively avant-garde effort since William Carlos Williams' turn toward colloquial and simple language, in that this avant-garde move is, as ever, deeply social, essentially antagonistic, and *against its predecessors:* against confessionalism, against narrative, against prose. Still, as we shall see, Language writing is strongly reflective of some of the other, more complex high-modernist techniques promoted and actually practiced by Pound; in particular, his sense of production of poetic values through the promotion of poetics as a social *movement,* and a faith in the deep and motivated iconic potential of language, which overpowers the more well-rehearsed postmodern mistrust of language as a medium. This optimism—more than the rejection of semantic linkage, more than any love of polyvocality or fragmentation—forms the most important commonality between writers in the so-called Language tradition. I shall explore the ways in which this plays out through an examination of the structure and content of some Language-writing-centered collections of poetry.

The argument that avant-garde or postmodern poetry is actually nothing more than an amalgam of neoromantic and modernist techniques is not a new one; Marjorie Perloff and others have rehearsed and explored it. But to this, Perloff adds: “What interests me is the unfulfilled promise of the revolutionary poetic impulse in so much of what passes for poetry today—a poetry singularly unambitious in its attitude to the materiality of the text” (Perloff 5-6). She turns to
Wittgenstein as the source of the recognition of this materiality, and the ways in which the “new” poets (any poets who are usefully engaging with the “revolution” in poetry: the return to the thing-ness of language) have provided a new way of looking at language-work: “language, far from being a vehicle or conduit for thoughts and feelings outside and prior to it, is itself the site of meaning-making” (Perloff 9).

However, there is a fine line between a thoughtful examination of the material and meaning-making functions of language and a less-useful fantasy about its potential. An important early iteration of this more sentimental approach can be traced back, as we shall see, to Ezra Pound, as can so many of the more contemporary avant-garde’s preoccupations: an attraction to the fantasy of the motivated sign.

### 3.1: The Motivated Sign and Avant-Garde Optimism

Charles Altieri reminds us that any useful definition of avant-garde poetry will take into account not only its similarities to modernism, but also its antagonistic break from modernist aesthetics: “Avant-garde art emphasizes exemplary forces that promise change for culture if it can align with how the artistic performance manages to break significantly from established decorums, now including the decorums of modern experiment” (Altieri, “Avant-Garde” 631, italics mine). We find a post-modern avant-garde poetics⁹, then, that is

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⁹ The term “post-modern” is meant here to convey a temporal relationship, the state of both chronologically following the modernist period in American poetry and bearing its influence. I will not attempt to assign specific aesthetic qualities to
ideologically and temporally bound to the aesthetics of modernism, even as it
tries to assert itself against the pure aestheticism of modernist techniques; it is in
this tension, Altieri argues, that we find the most interesting iterations of avant-
garde theory and practice. Modernism provided an agenda for formal
experimentation, but the post-modern avant-garde seeks to apply political utility
to this agenda, influencing the socius as it influences the individual
consciousness through radical language-awareness.

The modernist aesthetic, as it developed through realism, and is described
by the exemplary modernist, T. S. Eliot, who in one of his best-known critical
statements, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” frequently (though not
exclusively) calls for poetry’s return to the cadences of “natural” speech, to a
heightened awareness of how people “really” talk and of the most natural
function of language: communication, however complex and bewildering
communication may be (Eliot 291-301). It’s clear that in practice, Eliot’s refined
sense of the communicative function, particularly as it pertains to common
speech, had very little in common with the American colloquial; yet this ideal
continues to receive a good deal of emphasis. The attempt to discover, or
uncover, semiotic motivation in poetic language has a similarly ostensibly
utilitarian bent: The closer the sign itself corresponds with its sense, the clearer
and the more intense the correspondence and communication will be between
poet and reader, and thus the more “successful” the poem will be. It is
Coleridge’s dream of “the perfect words in the perfect order”; it is the faith that

this nomenclature, in the hopes that my use of the terms “avant-garde” and
“experimental” will do that work.
language contains and conceals a deeper, more ideal correspondence with the world, to which poetry offers access.

To describe one aspect of the avant-garde faith in the transformative powers of poetic language, I will borrow an odd and rarely-used term: iconicity. The use of “iconicity” was brought into the vocabulary of linguistics by the posthumous publication of Charles Sanders Peirce’s *Collected Papers* of 1931-1958. Peirce’s writings describe a philosophy of the active sign: a triad of cause and effect moving from object to sign (that which is presented to the consciousness for interpretation) to interpretant (an interpretive thought), and translated into an action based on the interpretant. Winfried Noth’s 2001 reading of Charles Peirce\(^\text{10}\) defines iconicity thus: “the necessity of some kind of parallelism between the speaker’s message and the hearer’s interpretation of that message. The latter must be iconic of the former to a certain degree if verbal [or written] communication is to be successful” (Noth 26). The speaker and the

\(^{10}\) In his essay “On a New List of Categories,” Peirce offers some general categories of signs:

1\(^{\text{st}}\). Those whose relation to their objects is a mere community in some quality, and these representations may be termed Likenesses [Icons].

2\(^{\text{nd}}\). Those whose relation to their objects consists in a correspondence in fact, and these may be termed *Indices* or *Signs*.

3\(^{\text{rd}}\). Those the ground of whose relation to their objects is an imputed character, which are the same as *general signs*, and these may be termed *Symbols*.

(Peirce 30)

The first of these distinctions, “Likeness,” has developed into Peirce’s conception of iconicity. An icon exhibits a natural resemblance to its object, and through this resemblance may reveal something about the nature of that object.
hearer (or the writer and the reader) must share enough image-concepts in
commom that a correlation is possible; however, the correspondence will never
be exact, and the sequence of interpretations and conceptual revisions that
ensues whenever an attempt at communication is made further assures the
continual semantic expansion of every sign. It is the dream of the poet that this
expansion may have profound psychological, spiritual, and political
consequences for poet and reader alike. Peirce’s discussion of iconicity runs, of
course, directly counter to the now-prevalent Saussurean doctrine of the
unmotivated sign.

One of Ezra Pound’s greatest periods of avant-garde optimism centered
around his discovery of the iconic, in the form of the ideogram. Pound’s 1920
volume of essays, *Instigations of Ezra Pound*, closes with Ernest Fenollosa’s “An
Essay on the Chinese Written Character,” which Pound translated. The essay
describes the particular fitness for poetic language of the Chinese character,
waxing eloquent about its literally pictorial roots, the “legs” of each of the Chinese
characters for “man,” “sees,” and “horse” (“they are *alive*” (Fenollosa 363)), the
Chinese character’s ability to represent nouns in action as they take place in time
(“a great number of these ideographic roots carry in them a *verbal idea of action*”
(Fenollosa 363)), and the Chinese written language’s general superiority for the
writing of poetry over that of alphabetic, or “algebraic,” language systems. With
what to twenty-first-century scholars and linguists might seem a charming and
impossible naïveté, Fenellosa writes: “In the algebraic figure and in the spoken
word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends on sheer
convention. But the Chinese method follows *natural* suggestion" (Fenollosa 362-3, italics mine).

Fenellosa’s sense of the Chinese ideogram reads fairly closely to the main tenets of Imagism: “direct treatment of the thing” (Pound, *Retrospect* 3) or “the welding of word and thing,” as he described it in a 1920 letter to William Carlos Williams, in which he castigated Williams for his failure to accomplish such in a recent batch of “incoherent unamerican poems” (Pound, *Letters* 38). For Pound, directness, clarity, and the fitness of word to object were of vital importance to the creation of the a new, wholly *American* poetics, one diametrically opposed to the artificial, “literary” formalism of the turn of the century. (As we have discussed, the fact that Pound and his close contemporaries Eliot, H. D., and Gertrude Stein were all living as expatriates does not appear to have interfered with this conception of their intrinsic Americanness.) By 1920, however, the early Imagism of 1912-14 was giving way to a poetics more explicitly concerned with linguistic and cultural signs: the later Pound experimented widely with iconicity, with the incorporation of traffic signs and other linguistic and cultural signs and icons into the text of the *Cantos*.

Pound sought to drive poetic language closer to the ideal he and Fenellosa hoped the Chinese character, or ideogram, might fulfill: to remotivate the signs and patterns of language. In this case, “making new” meant rediscovering or reestablishing a visually iconic and sound-symbolic relationship between signs and semantics. Poet and critic Louis Zukofsky, then Pound’s disciple and operating under the umbrella of Pound’s support, attempted to forge
his own avant-garde identity with his Objectivist poems and anthologies of 1928-
1931, but was for almost twenty years effectively silenced by Pound’s telling
criticism that the Objectivist poets “seem to me to have lost contact with
language as language” (Pound, *Active Anthology* 253). For the early Pound,
finding the edge of the avant-garde always meant a return to, and a remotivation
of, the basic properties of language “as language.”

This notion of “language as language,” is, for obvious reasons,
problematic: What does the individual (or collective) critic or poet consider
“language” to begin with, and why is it important to assume that there is a
“language” to begin with at all? The entire line of inquiry comes dangerously
close to assuming an *a priori* mother-language, or at the very least a set of ideal
qualities behind or within language, in the Platonic sense. What *is* language
when it is fully itself? Is it more fully “itself” if it is proven motivated? Avant-garde
poetics in the 1990s and early 2000s have developed in a more or less direct
fashion from Pound’s affair with the ideogram in the early 1920s; the angle has
changed, and the arguments have turned somewhat, but the preoccupations and
the essential optimistic belief in the discoverable pure qualities of language
remain.

A major project of the Language (“as language”) poets of the 1980s, then
and in their contemporary incarnation, is the attempt to disrupt what is viewed as
the constrictive and hegemonic linearity of the signifying process, embracing
non-sequitur and syntactic and grammatical fragmentation, often in the service of
the deconstruction of identity- and subject-politics. Contrary to—but also, in many
ways, in response to—the doctrine of the Poundian and modernist remotivation of the sign through a development of its iconic and symbolic\textsuperscript{11} properties, these writers are apparently interested in semantic disruption, the decomposition of language, the discovery or insertion of additional play between signifier and signified. However, as we shall see, these projects are, in essence, actually quite similar.

This ideal, motivated linguistic correspondence takes two possible forms, which can be roughly distinguished as “exact” and “inexact.” In the first, exact correspondence, the signifier and signified are closely, in fact organically, related, as in onomatopoeia, in which the word sonorically resembles that which it represents, or the Chinese character which physically resembles its reference. The inexact correspondence is less precise, but to many among the avant-garde, more exciting: it expands the semantic possibilities of any particular signifier to include all instances of resonance, reverberation, energetic correspondence, memory, sound, and association that the poet or reader might bring to it. In the exact correspondence, signification is organic, unavoidable, whittled to a point; communication is inevitable, effortless, and complete. In the inexact correspondence, the energies of both poet and reader collaborate to produce an

\textsuperscript{11} The symbol is “the most arbitrary and conventional” of Peirce’s three types of signs, according to Earl Anderson in his \textit{Grammar of Iconism}. (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998): for example, the colors of the traffic light, which is only recognized as a sign by those participating in the cultural system which connected the symbol with its meaning. An index is slightly more complex: it establishes its reference by means of a cause-and-effect relationship. For example, the proverb “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire”: the smoke is an \textit{index} of the fire. Clearly, this is a less reliable method of signification, as any given effect may offer multiple causes.
endless string of relationships and associations, endlessly productive and creative. This generative motion ultimately serves to lead both reader and poet into a more enlightened and energetic relationship—but still, into relationship, communication, with one another. Both of these fantasies arise from the same impulse toward the perfectibility of language-relations, either narrowed to the single, essential sense or exploded into a linguistic and spiritual vastness.

Critics of the products of Language writing—even those within the self-styled avant-garde—accuse it, as does critic Eliot Weinberger, of indulging in “depthless images and empty sounds” (Weinberger 197) but what is the “depth” of an image, exactly? We might assume that Weinberger finds Language writing empty of meaning, but is the lack of identifiable emotional resonance the problem, or does he identify a semantic disconnect? Is the establishment of a direct and unassailable route between sound and meaning the purpose of poetry, somehow? And why is it so frustrating when the connection is thwarted? At the center of these questions lies the difficult relationship between sound, visual form, and meaning in poetry as it is conceptualized by the practitioners of both avant-garde and conventional poetics at any historical moment. Charles Bernstein, a longtime and arguably the most influential avant-garde poet and critic, discusses the various levels of difficulty at work in what he calls “syntactically nonstandard poetry” thus:

“Artifice” is a measure of a poem’s intractability to being read as the sum of its devices & subject matters. In this sense, “artifice” is the contradiction of “realism”…the designation of the visual, acoustic, & syntactic elements of a poem as “meaningless,” especially insofar as this is conceptualized as positive
or liberating—and this is a common habit of much current critical discussion of syntactically nonstandard poetry—is symptomatic of a desire to evade responsibility for meaning’s total, & totalizing, reach; as if meaning was a husk that could be shucked off or a burden that could be bucked. Meaning is not a use value as opposed to some other kind of value, but more like valuation itself; & even to refuse value is a value & a sort of exchange. Meaning is nowhere bound to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility. (Bernstein, “Artifice” 3,6)

In Bernstein’s conception, “meaning” does not act in service of communication, realism, or clarity; it acts itself everywhere, and is everywhere acted on; it is a relationship, an action, that persists in spite of any poet’s attempts to disrupt it. “Artifice” is that which separates the reader from the poem’s sense; signs used in the construction of artifice are far from simply utilitarian, and are themselves divided from their own semantic weight, put to work as ornament, shadow, or screen. (We might recall Pound’s injunction to “Use either no ornament or good ornament” (Pound, Retrospect 5)). Here, then, are the poles of the avant-garde approach to the relationship between form and meaning—which in its pure form is the relationship between signifier and signified, the question of the motivation (or lack thereof) of the sign. And finally: what, then, is the use of attempting to motivate or explore the motivation of the sign, if the conclusion is only that meaning is ubiquitous and irrepressible?

Bernstein’s very reasonable argument works oddly against the trend of what he sees as contemporary avant-garde criticism, which prioritizes demotivation and attempts to “evade responsibility for meaning’s total, & totalizing, reach; as if meaning was a husk that could be shucked off or a burden
that could be bucked” (Bernstein, “Artifice” 6). Artifice—the appearance of “meaninglessness” of a poem’s formal and stylistic choices—is construed as “positive” and “liberating,” a sort of freeing up of space for syntactic and philosophical play; but it’s also futile to try to escape meaning, which enacts the poem’s agenda in spite of any efforts to the contrary. This conflict between the aims of avant-garde poetry and its practice permeates every text devoted to its representation, particularly anthologies and other published collections, which do the very work avant-garde writing works against: they offer version, interpretation, and meaning in a way that can only be described as “totalizing.”

3.2: Finding the “Language” movement

Still, we know, because those who were there tell us, that in the 1970s and 1980s there was no such thing as a “Language” poet. Bob Perelman insists, “there never was any self-consciously organized group known as the language writers or poets—not even a fixed name,” but goes on to explain, “the positive structures of language writing are socially and aesthetically complex and in places strained and contradictory, but the movement has been more united by its opposition to the prevailing institutions of American poetry” (Perelman, *Marginalization*, 12). Ron Silliman warns us that “this impulse to name confuses a moment with a movement” (Silliman, *American Tree*, xx).

Still, in the intervening years, even the most conservative have come to accept and even embrace the nomenclature. In their rebellion against the confessional transparency of contemporary lyricism, the loose affiliation of poets and writers that has come to be referred to as the Language poets, or Language
writers, developed certain theoretical if not formal similarities, a poetics of process and practice, resonance and recollection, narrative dislocation, the disruption of signifier and metaphor, found language, materiality, and nonsense: a reciprocal relationship between text and reader, somehow both alienating and cooperative.

The seeds of the original anthology of Language writing, *The Language Book*, co-edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein and published in 1984, may be found in Barrett Watten’s 1971 *This* magazine, with its famous introductory declaration “I HATE SPEECH.” *The Language Book* is a collection of about half of the work published in the journal *Language*, co-edited by Bernstein and Andrews between 1978 and 1980, to increasingly mixed and generally polarized critical attention: the frankly theoretical bent, the sometime non-sense, the intensity of its intellectualism, alienated many a reader accustomed to the narrative and emotional frankness of the lyric and confessional styles most recently popularized through the growing influence of poets like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. What resulted was a poetics some deemed unreadable by all but the most seasoned initiates.

And indeed, the Language-affiliated writers *were* a movement, not a moment, in spite of Ron Silliman’s and others’ protestations—even Charles Bernstein tries to shrug off the label in his essay “The Conspiracy of ‘Us’”, which appeared in volume 2.8: “I don’t believe in group formation, I don’t like group formation, but I am constantly finding myself contending with it, living within it, seeing through it…The danger is that we will hide ourselves amidst the shuffle to
proclaim who we are” (Bernstein, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 2.8). Still, the Language-affiliated writers were much too well-organized to be written off as a simple convergence of like-minded friends and innovators. Self-defined, self-codified, and self-institutionalized, every work of Language writing was meant to be read in conjunction with others and beside statements of its own poetics. The journal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E was founded in 1978 by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews for that very purpose: to collect and present a version of the new in poetry and poetics. Whether or not “the Language movement” was their intent, it was clearly their intent to provide some coherence to a certain type of poetic experimentation, and it worked; as early as volume two contributors like Ron Silliman were describing “those who associate themselves with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E” (Silliman, “Particulars”).

The first issue of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E journal appeared in 1978; it would run through 1981, totaling only four volumes. The publication transformed rapidly in its short tenure: the first three volumes were typewritten, photocopied, and distributed by Bernstein and Andrews, without a table of contents or page numbers, while Volume Four was taken up and published by the more well-funded journal Open Letter as “The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Issue,” simultaneously Open Letter 5.1 and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Volume Four: handsomely typeset, perfect-bound, and much more widely distributed as part of the larger periodical.

The journal remained, however, consistent in its aims and aesthetic priorities throughout its iterations. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E does not “read” like a journal of poetry; the selections that give away their status as poems on the
page—through devices like line length, apparent stanzas, and some elements of concrete poetry—are few and far between, while most of the text carries the markers of conventional prose. Reviews are frequent, as are responses to theory and other critics. Volume 2.7 includes a “Non-Poetry” feature, in which a number of Language-affiliated writers list the “five non-poetry books that they had read in the last few years that have had a significant influence on their thinking and writing” (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 2.7). Selections range from Lyn Hejinian’s study of “linguistic anthropology…overlapping…with Marxism” (Hejinian, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 2.7) to Jackson MacLow, who listed only Milovan Djilas’ *The Unperfect Society: Beyond the New Class*. Ron Silliman prefaced his selection by remarking that “Important as books are, it is being that determines consciousness” (Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 2.7).

*The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, an anthology of selections from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, appeared in 1984, a mere three years after the journal had ceased publication. In their introduction to the text, Bernstein and Andrews tell us, “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, program, or subject matter” (Bernstein & Andrews ix). The work is not only to transform poetry, but to transform reading; and through transforming reading, to transform thought. The aims are high: to make reading reciprocal, active, instructive, and transformative; it works against the simple, colloquial poetic language of some of their contemporaries, what Ron Silliman called “New American poetry, the self-
consciously anti-academic tradition of the 50s and 60s, a wide range of writings whose only points of agreement were an insistence on the centrality of William Carlos Williams and a preference for poetry that, read aloud, sounded spoken” (Silliman, *American Tree* xvii). Finally, these strategies worked to problematize the definition and utility of language-as-communication, of verbal and literary transparency.

*The Language Book* is, as a text, strongly concerned with the relationship between meaning and power. It is, as Andrews suggests in his 1990 essay “Poetry As Explanation, Poetry As Praxis,” “writing as politics, not writing about politics... works that foreground the process by which language ‘works’, implicating the history & context... bringing those building blocks & limits of meaning & sense back inside the writing, giving you greater distance by putting them within the internal circuitry” (Andrews 24). He goes on to explain: “It’s as if the established order tries to sew itself up – into permanent stability -- & to sew us & our meanings up inside it. Yet if the social order both constructs & disrupts us, we both construct & disrupt the social order” (Andrews 31).

To this end, the volume is presented in three sections: “Poetics and Language,” “Writing and Politics,” and “Readings,” in which Language-affiliated poets comment on the works of other (if retrospectively) Language-affiliated poets. *The Language Book* does its best simply to represent a cultural and literary moment, but its aims are limited, its introduction brief, editorializing kept to a minimum, beyond, of course, the matter of selection. However, a poetics can be discovered; I will attempt to describe some of its most compelling features
before moving on to a discussion of the text’s deep language-based optimism and idealism.

Bruce Andrews confronts the accusations of “unreadibility” leveled at the avant-garde, attempting to strip the term of its pejorative quality: He defines “unreadability” as “that which requires new readers, and teaches new readings” (Andrews 30). For Andrews, reading becomes a practice of spiritual, as well as political, potential, to be approached with complete openness to each poem’s particular strategies: these are poems whose own methods are encoded within their form, poems that teach their readers how to read them. The earlier attempts of the Romantics, the Imagists, the Objectivists, and others to wrest American poetry away from its occasional, didactic function, and turn the poet and reader into receptacles for the wonder of the object are also examples of this project of consciousness-transformation; however, the work of the Language movement, or moment, begins to shift the focus even further inward: language itself becomes the object.

In his “Private Enigma in the Opened Text,” Alan Davies describes the source of all this confusion: the textual “enigma”:

The author may plant in his text his enigmas…There is pleasure in placing the deliberately extraneous, the stain…for the writer, the enigma remains a sign of himself in the text of himself, a unique entry of himself upon his language. It is that part which he obstinately holds to as he gives it all away. The presence of the reader is implicit in the pleasure of enigma; the author is a voyeur, enjoying as he writes, the pleasure of his reading of his text…in the enigma he claims in one instant the combined functions of reading and writing; he completes already, again and in part, what already
His essay—which begins with the astounding statement “The trace of the enigma is negligently latent in all writing. The enigma is a colorless monovalent feature in textual omnivalence” (Davies 7)—exemplifies the self-indulgent strain of which the Language poets are so often accused. This deliberate flaunting of not only the reader’s expectations, but the reader’s pleasure in the text, in favor of the poet’s pleasure, can be deeply frustrating; the poetic practice that arose to popularity through the influence of the early Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams privileges colloquialisms and narrative clarity. For Davies, the enigma allows the poet to retain a secret; it is a defense against the trend toward confession, toward complete openness (again, in Jerome McGann’s term, “accommodation”); it leaves a fragment of self visible but keeps the whole hidden. It foregrounds the exchange of power between reader and poet, and insists on the poet’s right to withhold—and pleasure in withholding.

Whether the textual enigma is received as aggressive and exclusive or mysterious and tantalizing, the original Language anthology presents and explores the conundrum, and it embodies a central feature of their poetics: “perfectly balanced (of one ‘side’), it is the perfect signifier, the only one not drawn apart (revealed) by unequal (metaphorically inexact) sides” (Davies 10). The enigma has been raised to the status of a new poetic device; it is a metaphor exploded, a figure more exact because it is unreadable. It becomes, ideally, not a closing down but an expansion of possibility, a way of (as Bernstein himself has
“releasing the energy inherent in the referential dimension of language” (Bernstein 115). It is meant to be the mark of the poet, impossible to comprehend but the more captivating for its incomprehensibility. Davies would like it to offer both sides of the reading equation equal pleasure, and equal difficulty.

In Charles Bernstein’s preface to the 1990 volume _The Politics of Poetic Form_, he refers to George Oppen’s famous revision of Shelley’s equally famous dictum: “poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world” (Bernstein vii). It is in this return to the importance of transforming the cognitive processes of the reader through the transmission of alternate modes of producing and receiving language and meaning that we find the essential qualities of their project. Poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged, and the unacknowledged, the mystery, is everywhere. But what of the question of legislation, and why should it be necessary that poets have this particularized power? It is difficult to resist taking this impulse to legislate the interior, “unacknowledged” world—in essence, to draft laws defining and controlling the parameters of this world—to its logical conclusion: the poet becomes rulemaker, as the articulator of universalities, not only governing our moral and imaginative lives, but critically, our aesthetic and formal choices, and poetry in general. And indeed, the Language poets’ work continually works the boundary between poetry and criticism; its poetics are embodied and bound within its poems.

Much of the work found among the Language-oriented poets, either anthologized within the early Language-movement works or self-identified as operating under the Language influence, is openly self-referential, offering both
an explanation and a critique of its own operations within its structure. Consider Alan Davies' “This predilection for the mind in art. Where did I get it?”, from the original *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*:

Structure is physical combination.

Economy maintains material, accepting it to structure.


Structure is enthused with materials. Structure is terminal; no surround.

...

Structure executes a project.

There is an element of life in structure which is absent from all other life. Structure is the altogether latent of possibilities. Its presence. When it is reached.

And structure is nomenclature; a meeting. It is absent. Before and after. Structure hovers: its presence in the absence it empties.

Structure bends the line of sight, sometimes only very slightly, sometimes acutely. Thus it is recognized.

I, a private and concrete individual, hate structures, and if I reveal Form in any way, it is in order to defend myself. (Davies 77-79)

Part manifesto, part landscape, Davies' poem confounds the reading process mainly in that it refuses categorization. Completely stripped of most conventional poetic devices—nary image, nary metaphor—the poem nonetheless insists on its status as *poem*, rather than presenting itself as a more traditionally argued critical work: the lines are set apart by space on the page, and in their use of
parallel structure and syntactic disruption, mimics the form, if not the content, of some types of traditional free verse. The poem rejects both poetic device and logical argumentation, relying instead on a highly demanding sequence of assertions joined only by the term “structure” and the reader’s willingness to engage intellectually and imaginatively, a demand common to many innovative, postmodern, and avant-garde poets. Thus, the content of Davies’ poem actively mirrors its shape, its “structure”: it is a polemic at once about the inescapability of structure, literary, cognitive, linguistic, semantic, and logical, and about structure’s deep limitations. To do this, Davies calls up but refuses to complete the more or less recognizable forms of poetry and criticism. For the Language poets, poetry plus criticism equals manifesto.

However, the question of politics for the Language poets does not end there. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book is rife with anti-capitalist, Marxism-lite sentiment, but this sentiment bears its own particularities nonetheless, of the sort we find in the following passage from Ron Silliman’s brief essay “If By ‘Writing’ We Mean Literature (if by ‘literature’ we mean poetry (if…))…”:

Unlike most programs, wch are self-limiting, that of writing in the framework of capitalism carries within itself the admonition, typical of an economy predicated on technical innovation & the concentration of capital, to “make it new.” The function of a truly political writing is to, first, comprehend its position (most explicitly, that of its audience) & to bring forth these “new” meanings according to a deliberately political program. Let us undermine the bourgeoisie. (Silliman 168)
Silliman attempts to reveal the capitalist ideology underpinning Pound’s original command to “make it new”; yet at the same moment his sincerity is called into question with the tongue-in-cheek “let us undermine the bourgeoisie.” It is an odd moment, and atypical of the relentlessly earnest and idealist politics found elsewhere in the volume: consider James Sherry’s “A, B, $”: “Avant-garde as Commodity: Standard patterns of syntax refer to the way things used to be. New patterns reveal the present” (Sherry 166)—yet even so, Silliman’s faith in art, and particularly in literature, to perform and invoke social change is undiminished.

In *The Language Book* we also find Ron Silliman’s early discussion of the generic limitations of Language writing:

…black American poetry, in general, is not language writing because of what so-called language writing is—the grouping together of several, not always compatible, tendencies within “high bourgeois” literature. The characteristic features of this position within literature have been known for decades: the educational level of its audience, their sense of the historicity of writing itself, the class origin of its practitioners…and, significantly, the functional declassing of most persons who choose such writing as a lifework. (Silliman 168)

Silliman’s insistence on the “functional declassing” of avant-garde poets is, perhaps, disingenuous; but his narrowing of the political project is useful. Language poetry is a series of strategies and functions working within an already-established literary framework; it self-consciously seeks to undermine that of which it is already a part. This is not to say that *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* or the Language writers present a unified political agenda; several of its contributors seem quite differently focused, and avoid making the kind of identity-
based distinctions Silliman dares. However, Ron Silliman’s influence on the development of the Language movement, such as it was, cannot be underestimated, and his attempts to more broadly socialize the literature of the bourgeois are sincere. Transformative reading is the key to his methods, as well, though it is happily conflated with a more material exchange, that of text as commodity:

She who satisfies her own need with the text of her own writing admittedly creates reading-values, but not books. In order to produce the latter, she must not only produce reading-values, but *reading-values for others*, social reading-values. (And not merely for others. In order to become a book, the text must be transferred to the other person, for whom it serves as a reading-value, *through the medium of exchange.* ) (Silliman 174)

Thus, what is being produced, transferred, taught, are these elusive “reading-values”; and the reading-values developed by any particular text are infused with not only the political energy of consciousness-transformation, but of the potential for material exchange, which may be latent or expressed through publication. For Silliman, the exchange of reading-values is powerful and possibly transformative, but clearly attended by various anxieties. The problem of exchange, here, is not exclusively a problem of capital; it’s the question of exchange more generally. Even if no monies are transferred, even if the work is handed out pamphlet-style, are we not participating in the structure of capital, if not capital itself? And if no monies are exchanged, what is expected in return? It’s tempting to read a facile critique of capitalism into Silliman’s statements, but it is not so much financial
reward, or the lack thereof, that concerns him; equally troubled is the very basic impulse to create, transmit, and propagate reading-values and ideas.

Bruce Andrews grapples with and expands the question in his 1990 essay, “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis”:

Rewriting the social body—as a body to body transaction: to write into operation a ‘reading body’ which is more & more self-avowedly social…Radical praxis…here involved the rigors of formal celebration, a playful infidelity, a certain illegibility within the legible: an infinitizing, a wide-open exuberance, a perpetual motion machine, a transgression. (Andrews 24)

Andrews’ terms are challenging, but his insistence on the social “reading body” which may be written into existence is crucial to understanding the energies involved. Language writing (as it has been collected as such) is “a body to body transaction”; it is about relationship, the instantiation and perpetuation of new modes of relationship that may be written back into the body. The assumption that language is the primary vehicle for relationship formation is, then, primary, even necessary, to any judgment of the relative success of the work, aesthetically, politically, or otherwise. Especially notable is Andrews’ emphasis on community as motion: community and relationship make motion possible, and the same “exuberance” make relationship worthwhile. Poetry-making is “formal celebration”; its transgressions are playful yet structured, taking place within a framework of rigorous practice.

In his 1987 defense of the Language project, “Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes,” Jerome McGann usefully divides Language poetics into two
rough divisions: the “nonnarratives”—in which texts consciously invert and confound causality and chronology—and the “antinarratives,” in which the reader must actively work to discover or create forms and relationships between segments of text (McGann 259-261). He argues that this more participatory reading-model is in fact productive of political and intellectual freedom, a sort of “textual activism” (McGann 266): “writing is used to contest and disrupt these forms of order which are always replicated in the ‘realism’ deployed through narrativities” (McGann 275). The strategies McGann identifies are, in fact, particular to Language writing in their self-consciousness and their insistence on readerly effort; in considering the selection of anthologies chronicling the Language project, Jed Rasula asserts that “it’s evident that the only issues about which a consensus was reached among Language Writers were the restoration of the reader as coproducer of the text and an emphasis on the materiality of the signifier” (Rasula 319). The Language-writing anthologies have, in large part, succeeded in developing a reading (and writing) community out of what may once have seemed a fairly disparate group of writers, of chronicling and preserving group identity through the formation and maintenance of a literary conversation.

Charles Altieri worries that McGann’s assessment was misconceived: “the direct assertion of political ends makes it extremely difficult to show how forms of meaning not devoted to representing social conditions can carry such broad implications” (Altieri 303). His criticism of McGann’s essay is incisive, first discarding McGann’s assumption of a tidy opposition between Language writing
and popular, personal poetry and accusing the Language writers—and, by association, McGann—for “[reifying] language by treating it as ‘the representative social form’” (Altieri 305). The title of his essay—“Without Consequences Is No Politics”—does the work. It’s unclear whether Altieri means to damn McGann or Language writing itself; he refers to “McGann’s Language writing” but is also consistently dismissive of the aims of the work in general. Put simply, Altieri does not believe that the process of political change through consciousness-transformation so prized by McGann, Andrews, and others, actually comes about through these particular practices.

In spite of the statements of the various and varied political projects of its many promoters, practitioners, and detractors, a wide vein of optimism runs through The Language Book, as it does through much Language writing. While in many ways this writing works to disrupt and demotivate the more obvious work of language—the simplicity of communication—it also expresses a great, almost magical, faith in the transformative power of language. Pound’s attraction to the iconic is an early example of the ways in which a skeptical stance toward the conventional uses and styles of language-use can betray a very real belief in the transcendental possibilities of that same system. In this way, the Language writers’ attempts to disrupt or problematize the process of conventional signification simply clear the way for other signifying strategies.

Andrews and Bernstein did, to an extent, address this tension in their introduction, but their language is strongly indicative of the idealism I describe, reaching, as it does, for a language that actually transcends the binaries of
motivated/unmotivated or reference/lack of reference. They describe reference as a “horizon”, infinitely extendable, a space of limitless psychological, spiritual, and artistic possibility:

[T]he idea that writing should (or could) be stripped of reference is as bothersome and confusing as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constructed world of ‘things’. Rather, reference, like the body itself, is one of the horizons of language, whose value is to be found in the writing (the world) before which we find ourselves at any moment. It is the multiple powers and scope of reference (denotative, connotative, associational), not writers’ refusal or fear of it, that threads these essays together. (Bernstein and Andrews x)

This sense of potential is, perhaps, naïve; it may even be uninformed. Still, at the end of the day the project is a fairly straightforward epistemological inquiry: “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, program, or subject matter” (Language Book ix).

3.3: In the American Tree: Language Realism Poetry and ‘Language’ Poetries

In spite of the multivalent and often apparently conflicting aims of Language-oriented writing, the chroniclers of the Language moment—Bernstein and Andrews, Ron Silliman and Douglas Messerli—have found in these more or less consistent, more or less effective aims a basis for codification of a sort. And indeed, the difficult project of anthologizing Language writing did not end with
Bernstein and Andrews. However, the anthologies that followed *The Language Book* present a retrospective look at the movement, one more, quite literally, grounded. Even so, we can recognize much of the highly emotional, idealistic rhetoric so common to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and *The Language Book* appearing in more refined form in later collections.

In 1986, the National Poetry Foundation published Ron Silliman’s *In the American Tree*, a much more expansive anthology of Language-related writing. While *The Language Book* worked from a more or less fixed set of contributions—those originally published in the *Language* journal—Silliman’s volume functions as more of a retrospective. It is divided into two sections, which organize the poems more or less geographically: East and West. Each section begins with a poet or poets Silliman considers seminal to that region: in the west Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten, editors of *This* magazine, and in the east Clark Coolidge and Charles Bernstein.

This organization bears out the persistent American- modernist interest in geographical distinction, so complexly exemplified in the relationships between on the one hand, expatriates like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein; and on the other, the States-bound William Carlos Williams, Harriet Monroe, and others. Silliman attempts few generalizations, stylistic or otherwise, from the grouping; in fact, he strives through this structure to be actually *representative*—that is, to represent a moment or continuum of moments not only chronologically but spatially.
Of any aesthetic differences between the “east” and “west” Silliman says only: “I have geographically divided the poetry in this volume into two sections in order to more clearly foreground the particular distinctions that occur within this writing, this debate. No doubt some of these differences can be attributed simply to who lives where and the important, but informal, influence of face-to-face interaction” (Silliman xxii). Thus, the geographical emphasis also serves to emphasize the community-based, relationally driven nature of the poems; each poem becomes a moment literally in conversation, a poet in a neighborhood.

Silliman goes on to enigmatically state, “In practice, I believe one can find very different orientations toward such issues as form and prose style (especially with regard to syntax) that relate closely to this geographic division” (Silliman xxii). He does not elaborate on the nature of these formal and stylistic “orientations,” leaving the reader to draw her own conclusions.

Silliman’s project began with the invitation and encouragement of Jerome Rothenberg, who knew Silliman was already putting together a feature on language-centered writing for Alcheringa magazine. In the American Tree self-consciously continues and develops the project of the Language Book, “rejecting a speech-based poetics and consciously raising the issues of reference…any new direction would require poets to look…at what a poem is actually made of—not images, not voice, not characters or plot…language itself” (Silliman, American Tree xviii). Silliman hoped to supplement the Language Book with his own volume, representing the Language-affiliated writings in all their multiple and
conflicting aims, styles, and moments; he intends the text to offer those writers a certain measure of self-description and self-determination; he cites the recognition that the failure to write and speak seriously about the work cedes the authority to define critical terms to others while canceling the possibility of any articulate self-discipline within the community…[this] felt need on the part of many of the poets gathered in this volume reflects a lack of consensus. This anthology is a record of the debate (Silliman, American Tree xx).

The volume’s title, In the American Tree, places Language writing along a continuum of American movements and moments spreading out from the American Renaissance through Romanticism, a poetics deeply involved with the nature of reality. The nature of the individual. The function of language in the constitution of either realm…Much, perhaps too much, has been made of the critique of reference and normative syntax inherent in the work of many of the writers here, without acknowledging the degree to which this critique it itself situated within the larger question of what, in the last part of the 20th century, it means to be human (Silliman, American Tree xx).

The loaded subtitle, on the other hand, tells us a good deal about the project of the text, and introduces a central set of arguments: three deliberately abstract terms, each of whose signification is rendered particularly mobile when they are considered in conjunction with one another. It implies a continuum on which “language” and “poetry” function as the opposite poles, or ends, with “realism” as a bridge or point of tension between the two; it refers to separate and important modes in American literature; it instructively separates the work of “language” from that of “poetry.” Of the three, of course, “realism” is the most puzzling;
Silliman seems to be suggesting an alternative to conventional American literary realism, one grounded in a different sort of attention to the American everyday. Instead of a reflection of the cadences and content of speech, this poetry attempts to represent speech as it interacts with thought, with influence, with external registers of language such as various media; with memory, reverberation, and the multiple possibilities of resonance.

*In the American Tree* is, in many ways, much less political than *The Language Book*. While the latter tends, as did the periodical from which it emerged, toward poem-as-polemic and the broad sweep of manifestoes, the former shows us the *results* of that theorizing on the intervening years of practice. *American Tree* is also less insecure than *The Language Book*, works less overtly to define or structure itself, allows itself more range, more sensual detail, more human sentiment than does the earlier text. Still, many of its poems are easily contextualized in the greater project of avant-garde antagonistic response. Consider Rae Armantrout’s “Tone,” which I shall reprint in full:

1

Hoping my face shows the pleasure I felt, I’m smiling languidly. Acting. To put your mind at rest—how odd! At first we loved because we startled one another

2

Not pleased to see the rubberband, chopstick, tin-foil, this pen, things made for our use
But the bouquet you made of
doorknobs, long nails for
their stems sometimes
brings happiness

3

Is it bourgeois to dwell on nuance? Or effeminate?
Or should we attend to it the way a careful animal
sniffs the wind?

4

Say the tone of an afternoon
Kindly but sad
“The ark of the ache of it”
12 doorsteps per block

5

In the suburbs butterflies
still spiral up the breeze
like a drawing of weightlessness.
To enter into this spirit!
But Mama’s saying she’s alright
“as far as breathing and all that”

6

When you’re late I turn slavish, listen hard for
your footstep. Sound that represents the end of
lack

(Armantrout 146-147)

Armantrout’s poem appeals to the enthusiast of avant-garde poetry in a
number of ways. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it offers a wry, self-
conscious approach to the register of conventional love poetry, to the more
fashionably transparent confessional free verse: what Peter Bürger and other
theorists of the avant-garde might call the “self-critical” stage.
The first stanza of the poem offers a glimpse into the thought-process of an anxious lover; yet already by stanza’s end we have a surprising, interrupted turn: “At first we loved because / we startled one another.” The tantalizing “At first” begins a story which is dropped, incomplete, for the bright details of the second stanza, which offers a version of Silliman’s new realism: a catalogue of object-images, but found lacking. The graphic “bouquet you made of / doorknobs, long nails for / their stems” gives the lie to any argument that the avant-garde refuses poetic imagery: in spite of its ironic self-consciousness, it’s an exemplary Imagist moment.

The poem provides a running commentary on its own form: on the tonal registers possibly in the conventional love poem from which it takes its cue. It also remarks on the slippery nature of tone, with its tentative, abrupt stanzas and questions. “Is it bourgeois to dwell on nuance?” the poet asks. And instead of the revelatory turn, the payoff, the “earned” ending of the more-conventional free-verse poem, we’re confounded by “lack”: the literal anti-ending, the “lack” in place of a narrative conclusion. Armantrout’s work in general often plays with narrative registers (for example, the poem preceding “Tone” in this anthology is called “Anti-Short Story”), and “Tone” is one of the most obvious examples of what not only Armantrout, but Silliman, is trying to show us about the potentialities of experimental verse. The movement is not only against, but alongside; it refuses conventional literary structures by moving into and through them. We do not find this type of work in The Language Book; In the American Tree is a powerful record of the way in which language-based writing has complicated its own
original habits by coming to produce poetry that, oddly, in its own self-consciousness, comes to look more and more like “poetry”; is, perhaps, in some ways a study of poetic styles and movements.

Douglas Messerli’s 1987 ‘Language’ Poetries: An Anthology, offers yet another approach to codifying the utility and aims of language writing. It adopts, with its self-conscious title, which places quotation marks around ‘Language’ and ‘Poetries’ in the plural, a slightly more skeptical attitude toward the formal, aesthetic and philosophical cohesion of the movement, instead placing emphasis—indeed, glorifying—the group’s social bonds as the only true ground of their interaction:

It is to the social context, then, that one must turn to find any real coherence in this ‘group.’ Particularly in San Francisco, and to a somewhat lesser degree in New York and Washington, D. C., the ‘Language’ poets—despite obvious differences in aesthetics—came together out of what Lyn Hejinian has called ‘motivated coincidence’ to provide each other the dialogue and stimulus necessary to create vital and intelligent poetry…They have built up a true community of thought that must be the desire of any poet not writing a hermetic verse for his or her eyes alone. (Messerli 8)

Through his reading of Hejinian’s remarks, Messerli articulates the project: “This coincidence produces a new relationship, which is at once the heart of communal sharing and a movement toward the centric; by giving up the self to language, one discovers in the language of the community a new self” (Messerli 7). Here we return to the crux of the matter: the community, and the anthology as an attempt, however fraught, to record the joys and difficulties of dialogue.
Messerli’s approach is interesting for its almost-complete prioritization of the community-based aspects of the movement(s). He goes so far as to argue, probably against the New Critical and confessional approaches, that

In truth, poetry “as we knew it”—the poem that functions as a sort of narrative snapshot of experience, by the poet who sees himself or herself—as Louis Simpson recently described his position—as a worker who, separated from ideas (the abstract), creates a primary product (like a coalminer digging coal) which when brought to surface represents “real” experience—perhaps these notions of poet and poem will not survive. Perhaps it does take a community of concerned thinkers to keep poetry/language alive as the substance of experience, of meaning. (Messerli 9)

Messerli’s assumption that “meaning” can be separated from, indeed occupies somehow a different realm from, descriptions of the “real,” touches on the essential problem of language writing: the relationship between description and abstraction. Further, his interest in language writing is powerfully colored by his social vision for the movement, and his anthology functions mainly to provide further unity and cohesion to the nomenclature and the group itself. Thus, as might be expected, the volume is slim, and its offerings are less interesting than those of In the American Tree. In fact, Silliman himself is absent from its pages, by his own choice: Messerli notes that “Because of his editing of his own anthology, Silliman opted not to participate in ‘Language’ Poeties” (Messerli 11).

The many iterations of language writing and avant-garde poetry in the American twentieth century have led to these attempts to provide the movement with clarification, to present and fix its aims through texts devoted to its explication. However, each of these attempts is at least partially bewildered by its
temporal, and thus temporary, nature. The function of the anthology—whether it be to provide a primer, to inspire further reading, or to clarify misconceptions—is ultimately in conflict with the aims of avant-garde poetry in general, and in particular language writing: to provide a transformative experience to its writers and readers, thus setting in motion a revolution of sorts in the social context—a move which turns us back toward the very optimistic idealism exhibited in the American avant-garde since Ezra Pound.
Is there, then, a group or network that we can indicate as the next, the emergent generation of experimental, or avant-garde, American poets? And if so, have they simply continued to carry out the projects established by the Language poets and modernists such as Stein, Pound and Williams, or do their projects turn against their predecessors in familiar avant-garde style? Mark Wallace argues that a certain distinctiveness has developed:

[The emerging avant-garde] is a multiplicity of consciously used formal conjunctions, disjunctions, refusals, acceptances, celebrations and despairs that can make use of all formal possibilities in the various situations from which they speak. That is, it is a highly critical use of poetic forms that explores the tensions between all conceivable formal possibilities as the ground of its practice. (Wallace)

In Wallace’s formulation, the disparity and variety of the emerging avant-garde’s preoccupations and methods marks it as avant-garde, while insisting that we consider the avant-garde movement as such in a wholly different way: as a practice of multiplicity and tension taking place over time, and often across great geographical distances; members of a “movement” may only ever meet as the result of a poetry blog or listserv. Juliana Spahr, onetime editor of O-blek, agrees, with particular emphasis on the notion of inclusiveness as a defining quality of the new American avant-garde:
What I would argue is perhaps the most distinct characteristic of work by emerging poets of the 1990s: the tendency to violate the aesthetic separations of various schools and to deliberately create an aesthetic of joining... (Spahr 409)

The utopian vision advocated by Wallace and Spahr demonstrates a reaction to the aesthetic of fragmentation so amply explored by earlier generations of the poetic avant-garde, yes; but does it also work against the sense of specificity and particularity so prized by those earlier poets? Can a sense of “movement” within the experimental poetic community still be said to exist, and how does it cohere—can it cohere, as with Wallace and Spahr, in its commitment against formal and semantic coherence and to not only deconstruction and dissolution but multiplicity and “joining”?

The essential factor for this generation’s poetic avant-garde is, as ever, its sense of coherence and community, yet the strategies for accomplishing communal identity have shifted. Much work has already been done in this direction. For instance, Susan Vanderborg offers paratextual discourse—a conversation between discourses within a poem, embodied in footnotes, reference and self-reference—as a strategy for building a community of readers:

How does the poet attempt to describe or reinvent a public poetry? How does she or he move from highly specialized language games to claims made in the first person plural, and what community is denoted by that usage?...American avant-garde poetry since 1950 [is] a series of innovations that document their own multiple strategies of making (a) new public space for experimental compositions. (Vanderborg 28)
Vanderborg’s formulation is useful, especially in its attempt to identify the specific textual strategies used particularly by avant-garde poets to create a collective of “claims made in the first person plural.” For Vanderborg, “paratextual discourse” offers a means of at least partial categorization: structures of inclusion and exclusion take place within the poems as the result of an elaborate network of reference and intertextual mapping. Indeed, these strategies are evident in much avant-garde poetry and poetics in the tradition of Eliot and the late Pound. What her formulation does not take into account is the large body of avant-garde work in the tradition of both William Carlos Williams and the Imagists: contemporary poets like Spahr herself, Rae Armantrout, and even, to an extent, Ron Silliman, owe as much to this colloquial and very visual style as the more elaborate intertextual projects of, say, Charles Olson’s Maximus poems owe to the Cantos.

The “paratextual” style, then, offers one persuasive model for a framework in which polyvocal discourse may be taken up and incorporated into a single “aesthetic of joining,” to return to Spahr’s terminology. But critical approaches to this type of discourse—many of them embodied and expressed, as in paratextual work, in the poetry itself—abound. The mechanics of group formation, or whatever grounds the new avant-garde poetics, and the mechanics of avant-garde poetic language itself have much in common. Poetic technique, aesthetic theory and philosophy, regionality, and identity operate as public spaces of commonality or separation, spaces from which to speak, from which to explore, various language games and divergences. In this chapter, I will discuss two important ways of thinking about avant-garde community in the 21st century: by
region, through a discussion of Bill Lavender’s anthology of experimental poetics *Another South*, and with the (ideally) anti-geographical, self-generating avant-garde communities made possible by the advent of the World Wide Web.

**4.1: Regionalism and Experimentalism: Bill Lavender’s *Another South***

It would be a mistake to assert that all branches of contemporary avant-garde poetics share an aesthetic, any more than the modernist avant-garde, in the form of the divergent poetic styles modeled by Pound, Williams, and Stein, has done so. However, the concept of “joining”, of the polyvocal collision of discourses, does offer a framework, however rough, for consideration of contemporary trends and movements. And as ever, examples of the ways these trends and movements have been collected provide perhaps the clearest windows into the complicated and self-conscious strategies of those who would promote their poetic agendas.

Such is the case with Bill Lavender’s 2002 anthology *Another South: Experimental Writing in the South*. This volume is instructive for a number of reasons, the most important of which is Lavender’s use of the foundational premises “experimental” and “South.” As we shall see, the juxtaposition of these two terms creates a tension that is most readily addressed—though even then, only partially addressed—as an example of the “aesthetic of joining” defined and advocated by Juliana Spahr and Mark Wallace. The anthology attempts to create a new Southern poetry, one with the power both to embrace and to transcend regional and cultural boundaries through a radical and spiritual polyvocality.
Hank Lazer, who penned the volume’s introductory essay, suggests that the success of this anthology is due to the energy generated at the intersection of “southernness” and “experimentalism.” Indeed, there is a great deal of thoughtful, intelligent, and even pleasurable work in *Another South*, and it does manage to exemplify something like the wide range and multiplicity of styles and approaches that Spahr and others have argued is the hallmark of the new experimentalism. But what of this charged intersection? Does literary Southernness really constitute such a powerful counter-agent to the forces of experimentalism? No one appearing in this anthology—not the editor, Bill Lavender, nor series editors Charles Bernstein and Lazer, nor the poets represented within—is ignorant of the difficulty of marrying a self-conscious evocation of the Southern literary tradition to 21st-century avant-garde poetic strategies. The emphasis on southern identity of the poems in this volume does owe something to subject matter, and that, naturally, has much to do with the poems selected for inclusion; but the editors of *Another South* have a more complex project in mind.

A certain degree of disingenuousness on the part of its editors is impossible to ignore: for instance, Lavender insists,

> It has not been my goal to define a new genre, style, or movement, and I make no claim for any sort of dominance by any of the styles and genres included. I only want to claim that the work represented here is happening, a simple fact that would be hard to deduce from reading the standard southern publications. (Lavender xi)

The existence of experimental Southern writing is much less of a “simple fact” than Lavender suggests, and contrary to his assertions, the text does have a
project: it firmly and with great self-awareness situates itself between the poles of “Southern” and “experimental,” attempting to find, or create, a place for experimental writing in the South.

The desire for a particularly Southern literary and geographical space for experimental work appears very much in response to what is here viewed as the hegemonic Southern literary canon, particularly its postwar incarnation—portrayed sometimes as an unfortunate oversight, sometimes an outright conspiracy on the part of a number of Southern poets distinguished from the “experimental” by certain stylistic and formal choices, as well, it seems, as by their relative visibility.

It can be difficult to agree on what makes one poem experimental, or avant-garde, and another mainstream, either in form, content, or mode of production and distribution. Attempts at such categorization are met with the slippery inconsistency of poetic modes, intention, and interpretation. But as we have seen, it is possible to take note of who purports to be the avant-garde at any given time; it is possible to analyze each claim to the title. We might recall Renato Poggioli’s “agonism”: the avant-garde artist’s struggle and self-sacrifice in her commitment to the production and promotion of the new (Poggioli 67-68). This assumes, of course, a fixed and identifiable structure against which avant-garde work pushes and which avant-garde work resists. And for the purposes of Another South, there actually is such a structure: capital-S Southern poetry, as set forth in formal anthologies like Leon Stokesbury’s The Made Thing, Fred Chappell’s Locales, and William Andrews’ W. W. Norton anthology, The
Literature of the American South. In his preface to the volume, Bill Lavender follows Poggioli: “By ‘experimental’ I mean poetry that pushes at a boundary, that attempts to cover new ground, that transgresses stylistically, semantically, socially, or politically” (Lavender xi). Further, and perhaps more tellingly, he defines the other side as the poets of the “traditional academic corrals” (Lavender xi).

Hank Lazer makes a pass at the question by distinguishing the work of experimentalists from the work of more traditional poets by its very uselessness:

a celebratory marginality based on an affirmation of the unalienated nature of the labor and of the deliberately useless nature of the work. . . . The politics of such a liberatory poetic praxis is best expressed by Jim Leftwich, who asks, ‘What happens if one desires to practice useless skills, skills that are not useful to maintaining the structure of the culture? . . . We should think of this usefulness as meaning only one thing: useful means useful to the dominant culture, always and only. (Lazer xix)

Although it may be instructive to ask a few of the more conventional contemporary poets how useful, really, they feel their poetic practice is to the greater work of the dominant culture, Lazer’s point is clear: experimental poetry is marginalized because it chooses the margin, because it is politically subversive, because it is dangerous politically, because, to borrow Ron Silliman’s terms from the original Language Book, it “undermine[s] the bourgeoisie” (Silliman 168). This connection is an important one; the work of Another South takes more than one page from their intellectual and poetic predecessors, the Language poets of the 1980s. In rebellion against the poetic transparency advocated and promoted by the Imagists and other American poetic pioneers of
the early 20th century, the Language poets’ commitment to process and practice, resonance and recollection, narrative dislocation, disrupted signifiers and metaphors, found language, materiality, hybridity, and nonsense deeply informs the poets and editors of *Another South*.

Fine, then, but what of “southernness”? “Southern poetry” ranges from the formalist work of Edgar Allan Poe, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, to the peripatetic A. R. Ammons and the formally experimental C. D. Wright; from early African-American poets like onetime slave George Moses Horton (1797-1883) to Yusef Komunyakaa, and beyond. Michael McFee tells us that “Southern poetry has always been heavily white and male in nature”; also that “Southern poetry has always been elegiac, whatever the lost cause being memorialized” (McFee 667-668). Still, he recognizes on the contemporary scene “a great diversity of voices…a balkanization of poetry: the art has become much more localized, so that it’s almost more accurate to speak of (say) Mississippi or Appalachian poetry than of a monolithic southern poetry” (McFee 665).

In his introduction to *The Literature of the American South*, Bill Andrews distinguishes a Southern writer by a certain type of attention to “that elusive quality known as ‘voice’” (Andrews xvi), but Lazer rejects this preoccupation:

This emphasis on a singular ‘voice’ as an overriding feature forecloses much writing that is principally neither voice-based or univocal. Indeed, it renders invisible a range of modernist-inspired experimentation in poetry for this past century and creates the impression that ‘good’ writing will inevitably be linked to finding one’s distinctive ‘voice’ (Lazer xxii).
He goes on to wonder, “Did modernism (with the monumental exception of William Faulkner) bypass the South? Is postmodernism, particularly in poetry, a fad for innovation that southerners feel compelled to ignore? (Embrace ‘Dixie’, but stay away from that contaminated and contaminating Yankee complexity?)” (Lazer xxiii) In the same breath, he dismisses the entire notion of a literary South as “very much an invention and a projection of New Yorkers, New Englanders, and Westerners…a stereotyping of culture with economic implications” (Lazer xx).

There are a number of issues to be addressed here: if we reject the most common definitions of Southern literary regionalism, if we denounce it as restrictive, too elegiac, unnecessarily bound to the past, to history, to antiquated notions of voice and of narrative, then why speak about literary southernness at all? Is regionalism useful or even interesting in the context of experimentalism? And must regionalism be expressed in an overt relationship to place—which almost certainly involves some relationship to voice, dialect, history, or landscape—or is it, as the editors of Another South assert, simply a matter of where the poet is physically located when she is writing?

As an alternative to the too-restrictive poetic “voice,” Lazer offers what he calls “kudzu textuality”—a “rich, generative, polyvocal, over-determined, hybrid” style taking its name from the South’s hardly indigenous but still ubiquitous creeping vine (Lazer xxv). He explains, “Such textuality exhibits a hyper-fertility, a writing that oscillates between a more habitual sense-making and a new terrain of the pre- or post-verbal, somewhat like Kristeva’s chora, but also like an
aftermath of the alphabet world...[also] akin to various modes of religious experience, particularly talking in tongues and voudoun possession” (Lazer xxvii).

Fine, then, but how to distinguish the “kudzu” text: what does it look like? In Another South, the answer is complex and reflects a stylistic variety not often credited to literary avant-gardism, so often accused of limited range, inaccessibility, and derivative, overly theoretical preoccupations. The kudzu text, on the other hand, is composed of sense and nonsense, the specific and the obtuse, the image and the abstraction, the polyvocality of the congregation and the singularity of the religious experience—we might begin to worry that “kudzu textuality” means so many things that it finally means nothing at all. But in fact, this hybrid quality is, according to Lazer, a distinguishing characteristic of the contemporary avant-garde project.

Take, for example, Bob Grumman’s “Cryptographiku for Wallace Stevens”: “spsjpi / vxqqhu / cwuvmn / winter” (Grumman 60). In this homage (or parody), each letter attempts to operate as a full semantic unit, carrying with it a full range of allusion, tonal and textual association and a potential for kudzu-style proliferation. Without the single direct referent—“winter”—the poem is a collection of barely-pronounceable letter-groupings. These letter-groupings might carry the effect of setting off the more powerfully resonant “winter”, and vice versa. The poem is, obviously, a coded version of Stevens’ “The Snow Man,” but to what end? Grumman’s selection in Another South also includes a number of “Mathemaku”: short haiku-style poems, some of which, like “Mathemaku for Beethoven”, depend heavily on their visual impact, with the words and phrases
“x”, “explainability”, “May”, and “the sky” coming together and apart in various combinations with a long-division symbol and blocks of repetitive text across a series of pages (Grumman 62-67).

This habit, in fact, demonstrates best the ways in which avant-garde poetics and poetries have absorbed the critical impulse: Grumman’s work might be considered not as concrete poetry, as the visually-based poems suggest, but as examples of a digital-era critical technique Jerome McGann has called “deformation”: the conscious reformulation of extant literary materials—poems, in particular—in hyper-patterned, sometimes alienating forms. Deformation is, McGann argues, a useful method for not just unpacking a poem’s system of meanings and signification (to make use of conventional workshop-speak) but releasing a poem’s signifying and meaning-making potential by actually changing—“deforming” and reformulating—a poem’s text on the page (McGann, Radiant 105-135).\footnote{In his discussion of deformation as critical technique in Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), McGann returns to Emily Dickinson’s famous Prose Fragment, extolling the transformative virtues of reading a poem backward. McGann takes this further by offering re-writings of a number of poems: as prose paragraphs, with additional white space, with rearranged lines or line breaks, and so on. He offers deformation both as a potentially useful critical strategy and as an example of the ways that interpretive acts always enact deformation, by paraphrase or critical imagination; it is, indeed, the imaginative response-potential of critical moves in which McGann is most interested. A further discussion of McGann’s digital-era approach to literary criticism will appear later in this chapter.} Grumman’s work shows us how closely the poetic, critical, and self-critical faculties of the avant-garde have come to work together.

Other poems in Another South do promise, and provide, something very much like Lazer’s “kudzu” style. A. di Michele offers a raving catalogue of
mystical and spiritual experience: “banshee legions haunting the wetlands allah
spinning zikr in the dust of angels crouching the windtunnel, sitting out the olive
direction the resonance head full of damaru djinn haunting the wetlands…” (di
Michele 156) Jerry McGuire’s halting, numbered narratives explore both religious
and regional myths, as in “Gongula”: “1 An old story 2 Which is true 3 surfaced
during excavations 4 NO 5 contained the lost books of 6 NO 7 NO 8 of the great
flood 9 and the strange deeds 10 NO” and so on (McGuire 145). Christy Sheffield
Sanford and Holley Blackwell contribute formally disrupted theatrical,
multifaceted prosey narratives. Still, much of the writing found here is stubbornly
voice-based: Kalamu ya Salaam’s occasional poems; Honoree Fanonne Jeffers’
vivid, subtly disturbed, overtly Southern landscapes and cadences; even Thomas
Meyer’s bright, epigrammatic stanzas. Most of these poems quite self-
consciously resist classification as “lyric,” with all its implications: solitary
speaker, character-based delivery, and the “earned” conclusion; yet one might
wonder whether this mistrust of voice is entirely useful, since at the end of the
day, polyvocality is an effect, not a mode of authorship.

Lazer also works to incorporate one of the more time-honored aspects of
Southern literature into his “kudzu textuality”: the oral tradition, what Lazer calls
“an oral/aural density, a musicality of the poem…a sounding and a (varied)
sound” (Lazer xxix). This is, in fact, one of the less persuasive aspects of Lazer’s
program (since Lazer’s and Lavender’s claims of a more profound inclusiveness
do not manage to get them out of the dilemma of programmaticity). For Lazer,
this “oral/aural density” is a particularly direct avenue to an experience of the
divine: “Such knowing enters first by faith in sounds, a pathway first governed by a submission to the associations of kindred sounds” (Lazer xxx). This mysticism is essential to the “kudzu” project, but finally returns us to the old capital-S Southern literature: the power of call and response, the field song, the oral traditions of a banished African culture, and storytelling.

Lazer is quick to remind us that “kudzu textuality” is, “as was the seemingly coherent ‘Southern literature’, a construction” (Lazer xxx). He is “simply” requesting that “a broader stylistic range and an innovative necessity” (xxx) be granted Southern poetry. This amounts, ultimately, to an updated version of the strategies already explored by Southern poets: a preoccupation with region, particular features of the Southern landscape (including kudzu, invasive and hardly indigenous), the oral tradition, and various forms of both institutionalized and unconventional spirituality. These techniques and traditions are quite easily bred with the interests of experimental American poets since the early 20th century: disruption of semantic, syntactic, and grammatical processes, an interrogation of form, a greater self-consciousness of its theoretical underpinnings, a mistrust of narrative.

Another South is a text in which a highly proscribed and specific mode of authorship—Southern literature—meets the highly proscribed and specific authorial incarnations of the American poetic avant-garde as it was handed down from Pound, Williams, and Stein. This potent collision and reworking of poetic theory and practice demonstrates, in its intent and, possibly, its practice, the
hybrid, “kudzu” quality prized by Hank Lazer, as well as the “aesthetic of joining” observed by Juliana Spahr and Mark Wallace.

4.2: Living Poetry Online: Poetry and Community on the World Wide Web

The flexible, dispersed community of the contemporary American avant-garde attempts to take up the task of undermining their own high-literature influences: firstly by exploring a wide range of energetic and poetic influence in their critical work and poetic practice, and secondly by attempting to release their poetics from the burden of geographical community and influence. Those who have taken up this work and continue it into the twenty-first century show signs of community and diversity beyond reliance on a self-created, self-promoting, and self-propagating group identity. They communicate widely and extensively, publish at a group of smaller presses, and occasionally appear in the same anthologies—but their techniques and readily (or not-so-readily) admitted influences are both varied and inclusive, and their meeting places virtual and virtually public.

Further, they have access to another publishing and communication medium that was unavailable to their intellectual and poetic predecessors: the Internet. The University of New York at Buffalo, whose Poetics program is mecca to the avant-minded, runs an extensive poetics listserv, as do countless poetics programs and like-minded groups. Communities cohere around poets’ blogs; Ron Silliman’s own functions as a sort of mothership, with links to younger poets’ blogs and Web sites. Online interaction has all but replaced the salon. And, unsurprisingly, the experimentally-minded poetics scene online mimics any
physical social group. Certain members are deferred to, certain members’ posts are always ignored; fights break out, sometimes are carried out over a number of listservs and blogs at once; insults are flung publicly, dirty laundry is aired. These Web sites and blogs offer a continuously updated record of the conflicts and conversations of every moment, a massive, active, and collaborative 21st-century anthology.

The impact of digital media on the humanities, and particularly on poetry and poetics, has been most broadly addressed in the context of digital/poetic literary criticism. The marriage of poetry, poetics and criticism is, as we have seen, a widely-used and very particular strategy of the self-conscious poetic avant-garde: Gertrude Stein’s, the Language writers’, and other avant-garde artists’ incorporation of criticism and poetics into their creative work has given rise to a style of criticism which, while still operating primarily as criticism, makes use of techniques more typically associated with poetry itself: anaphora, sound-patterning, unconventional line breaks, and so on. These strategies have been explored in print collections such as Michael Palmer’s 1983 text Code of Signals: Recent Writing in Poetics, Christopher Beach’s 1998 Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics, the essays of Charles Bernstein, and in other places; digital media offers a new realm of practice to this evolving genre.

Hypertext and hypermedia have long been embraced by the literary avant-garde for their apparently limitless potential for narrative dislocation, generic blending, and temporal disruption. Early experiments like Shelley Jackson’s retelling of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (with a dose of L. Frank Baum), 1995’s
*Patchwork Girl*, were built with new authoring tools like Storyspace, a program designed for hypertext authors to enable complex mapping of hyperlinks in narrative and anti-narrative structures. Texts like *Patchwork Girl*, which make use of hypertext in narrative practice *and* in order to interact with and disrupt earlier texts, would seem to aspire to a textual bliss similar to the pleasure Roland Barthes explores in readerly interaction with clearly disruptive texts. Barthes’s 1975 description of his experience of the edge between the pornographic and literary registers of Sade’s language might usefully be applied to the contemporary experience of hypertext and hypermedia, its interaction with its own literary origins, its potential and its danger to conventional reading practices. Barthes describes the reader’s liberatory pleasure on encountering such an edge, and this framework serves well in discussion of the multiple transgressions made possible by hypertext. Plagiarism, generic disruption, and the break with established modes of creating and distributing literature—all established textual strategies dear to the avant-garde—are high among them:

Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is nothing but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. (Barthes 6)

A number of critics have turned to hypermedia to advance the development of other textual modes explored by the American poetic avant-garde in the modernist and post-modernist traditions: poetic criticism and
pedagogy. Marcel O’Gorman argues that the real potential for innovation of the
digital format (mainly as exhibited in various hypertextual forms, once primarily
distributed in the more limited CD-ROM format but now much more frequently
distributed online) for literary studies can be found in an enhanced synthesis of
literary, visual, and audio modes:

What I am attempting to outline in this book is a
heuretic\textsuperscript{13} approach to discourse that draws on the
suggestive power of pictures as a means of
generating new modes of writing suitable to an image-
oriented culture. As generative instruments, pictures
are extremely productive. A picture tends to speak
\textit{with less authority than words}; it is not subject to the
same, rigid rule-set, and therefore it is more capable
of generating divergent cognitive responses from the
viewer… (O’Gorman 12)

O’Gorman’s work, centered around the critical and pedagogic practices of the
University of Detroit Mercy’s Electronic Critique Program, foregrounds the critical
potential of digital media in a way that actually integrates the avant-garde literary
strategies of hyper- and polyvocality into its interactions with literature, just as
avant-garde American poets from Gertrude Stein to the Language-oriented
writers to Hank Lazer have incorporated techniques into their poetry that might
be most readily identified as critical or theoretical. O’Gorman argues that

…hypertext may be used not only as a sort of light
switch between the classical, academic binary of
rhetoric vs. philosophy, but also as a multivalent
switch, or \textit{rheostat}, if you will, for toggling between

\textsuperscript{13} O’Gorman draws the term “heuretics” from Gregory Ulmer’s text \textit{Heuretics and
Teletheory} (1994) to describe “a supplementary or alternative logic to
hermeneutic discourse…a logic of invention…a way out of the hermeneutic
circle” (O’Gorman 12) that might, in its generative potential, be more suitable to
descriptions of avant-garde and digital literary and literary-critical practice.
cultural, epistemological, autobiographical, political, and historical categories. Hypertext, then, should not be considered as a digital on/off switch for managing the components of classic scholarly discourse, but as a forum for managing a much more complex, multivocal mode of discourse in which figure and ground, text and image, self and other, shift continuously. (O’Gorman 83)

Thus, hypertext offers the possibility of increased communication and interaction not only between generic modes (i.e. literary works and literary criticism), but registers and traditions of critical discourse. O’Gorman’s analysis of the critical and pedagogic approaches to literature enabled by digital technology offers one model for the way the same technologies can be mobilized to influence the way literary works are themselves produced: their content, context, distribution, and reception. It may be too soon to assess the strength of O’Gorman’s greater argument—that a shift to digital modes of production and reproduction of, and interaction with, literary works (by no means limited to the archive or digital catalogue) will actually re-invigorate the humanities with relevance and popular attention in this era of the “crisis in the humanities”—but his interrogation of the opportunities for evaluation of critical discourse is both useful and contemporary.

To return to Jerome McGann’s discussion of “deformance,” treated earlier in this chapter: McGann expresses a similar optimism about the liberating potential of digital methods applied to literary criticism, and particularly to criticism of poetry. McGann’s account of the development of *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Research
Archive\textsuperscript{14} traces the roots of the humanities’ use of digital technology back to the most basic—the straightforward, searchable digital archive or database of literary materials, and certain digital engines for cataloguing and studying language-use statistics—and forward to the type of hypertext archive/critico-poetic interaction that McGann and his colleagues hoped to explore in The Rossetti Archive.

McGann emphasizes that deformance is perhaps most importantly a performative critical technique (a process of deform-ing through per-formance), one which enacts its own creative engagement with a text through a process of re-shaping and re-imagination. It is a process by which a poem’s own internal energies might be brought to work alongside the critic’s interpretive powers by disrupting the poem’s coherence:

Deformance does want to show that the poem’s intelligibility is not a function of the interpretation, but that all interpretation is a function of the poem’s systemic intelligibility. Interpreting a poem after it has been deformed clarifies the secondary status of the interpretation. Perhaps even more crucially, deformance reveals the special inner resources that texts have when they are constituted poetically…Good, bad, mediocre poems, by whatever measure or judgment: In so far as they are poetically made, they share this special kind of intelligibility. (Radiant 120)

\textsuperscript{14} Or “The Rossetti Archive”. The archive is scheduled for completion in 2008, but its extensive present incarnation is available at www.rossettiarchive.org. As viewed in April 2007, it is an ambitious project, attempting to collect “high-quality digital images of every surviving documentary state of DGR’s works: all the manuscripts, proofs, and original editions, as well as the drawings, paintings, and designs of various kinds…These primary materials are transacted with a substantial body of editorial commentary, notes, and glosses” (Rossetti Archive 1). Each of its exhibits is multiply linked to criticism, commentary, historical notes, and summary.
Deformance offers the critic a sort of hypertext-enabled mode of criticism without the presence or overt use of digital methods; these same techniques are employed in the construction of *The Rossetti Archive*. For McGann, every act of criticism, in the necessary act of paraphrase, is a deformance or degradation of the work under scrutiny: the “progression” of the critic’s thought, expressed in paraphrase and commentary, is mirrored by a “regression” from the language of the original work (*Radiant* 128). McGann argues that these are inevitable effects of critical study.

The implication of McGann’s study (which emerged out of collaboration with Lisa Samuels, Johanna Drucker, and others) is that the power of the obviously deformed text is in its ability to track and expose the interactions between reader (critic) and text: “all texts are marked texts” (*Radiant* 143). Digital technology, then, offers a way to explore the effects of truly random, computer-generated multiple readings, or deformances. Further, since much poetry has its own cyberqualities—nonlinearity, openness to multiple readings, sound-based patterning, and so on, poetry becomes the ideal ground from which to explore various dynamic digital reading practices.

The *Rossetti Archive* attempts to model this type of reading practice, with a potent interaction of facsimile, photograph, and draft copies with final work products, criticism, historical note, and gloss. The project is limited, yes, but its aims are clear: to present the *actual* text, as it has emerged as not only a set of linguistic or literary codes, or a physical object, but a locus for study, a set of conversations and markings both historically and physically grounded.
Hypermedia allows, if not the simultaneous presentation of all the aspects of a
text’s making and marking, at least the simultaneous availability of a range of
those aspects.

“What is needed,” concludes McGann, “is a dynamic engagement with text
and not a program aimed at discovering the objectively constitutive features of
what a text ‘is’” (McGann, *Radiant* 206). The physical reconstitution of the text in
a hyperlinked, cyberorganized format essentially mimics the form of avant-garde
poetics of the type I have discussed in this study: an energetic engagement
between formal, visual, critical, and theoretical impulses, with a high value placed
on generic and creative hybridity and joining. Both the *Rossetti Archive* and
another McGann/Drucker experiment, the “Ivanhoe Game” 15, provide models for
the way digital media have influenced the development of the community-building
hybridity favored by this strain of the avant-garde.

Also worth mention is Benjamin Friedlander’s critico-poetic book of essays
*Simulcast* (2004), in which Friedlander attempts his own version of deformance
with his rewritings of early criticism to treat the contemporary experimental/avant-
garde poetic scene. Friedlander styles himself as a poetic renegade, applying his
previous experience as a rock critic to criticism of the Bay Area avant-garde

15 “The Ivanhoe Game” is an experimental digitally-based game developed by
McGann and Johanna Drucker, in which players adopt critical roles and present
critical and textual moves across a specified field of discourse—first, *Ivanhoe*, but
later the game was adapted to consider *Wuthering Heights* and other texts. The
game provides a framework for its players to engage with and produce texts in
response to the original text or to other texts which operate in relation to the
original text; it is an interactive, generative game of wits, with few compositional
rules and little competitive spirit. For a full account of “The Ivanhoe Game”, see
*Radiant Textuality* pp. 209-248.
poetry world of the 1980s, bringing his skateboard along to poetry readings (to
wry comments by the likes of Michael Palmer) and confronting Bob Perelman
with charges of elitism after the publication of his 1987 book of poems The First
World (Friedlander 12-13). Language writing was a great influence on the Bay
Area milieu at the time; of the Language-based community Friedlander writes:

What distinguished the language writers from other poets in my eyes was not the efficacy of their
program, but the fact that they had one. Descendants
of Pound and Olson, they treated the poem as a
means rather than an end, that is, as a site for
enacting an intellectual project that was not itself
poetic, or was not necessarily so. (Friedlander 13)

Friedlander also notes, semi-ruefully, that “[language] work’s most immediately
verifiable dimensions were that of its readership, which was for the most part a
white, middle-class intelligentsia (one that most certainly included myself)”
(Friedlander 12). However conflicted he might have then been regarding the
value of Language writing—formally or otherwise—he emphasizes a recognition
of the legacy of its powerful community-building and readership-building
strategies and implicitly attributes his own experimentation to their example and
influence.

This experimentation takes the form of, as Friedlander himself describes
it, “applied poetry’…the creation of criticism through the strict recreation of an
earlier critic’s text” (Friedlander 2). This approach bears the echo and influence,
conscious or not, of McGann’s work on deformation in The Rossetti Archive and
“The Ivanhoe Game”; it also recalls Gregory Ulmer’s “chorography,” a way of
describing the interaction with hypertext as simultaneous reading and
composition taking place in a field in which geographical and temporal simultaneity are not only possible, but desired, effects.\footnote{Ulmer’s discussion of chorography (chora is borrowed from Plato’s term for place, through Jacques Derrida) appears in his 1994 study \textit{Heuretics: The Logic of Invention} (Johns Hopkins University Press). Although he refuses to offer a specific definition for the technique, it addresses the state—which can be accomplished in a number of ways—for the interactive and imaginative state of working one’s way through the imagined and physical space of a hypertext or hyperarchive, for instance.} Friedlander rewrites Edgar Allan Poe’s \textit{Literati of New York City} as \textit{Literati of San Francisco}; Jean Wahl’s \textit{A Short History of Existentialism} becomes Friedlander’s \textit{A Short History of Language Poetry}. And in the “Anti-Hegemony Project,” online posts to a Madonna fan site, alt.fan.madonna, are rewritten as posts to a fictional avant-garde poets’ fan site, alt.fan.silliman, satirizing the culture of the celebrity-poet that was becoming so pervasive in the University of Buffalo’s poetics program.

The interest of the latter project for our purposes is mainly in the way the object of its satire is not individual poets or their work; Friedlander’s target is SUNY Buffalo’s poetics program as it emerged under Charles Bernstein, who in 1992 started the program’s famous and infamous Poetics listserv as an online version of the program’s “scene,” taking its cue from and in many cases imitating the actual social dynamics first established in the face-to-face contact of members of the SUNY Buffalo poetics community. The Anti-Hegemony Project sought to intervene in the workings of the Poetics list by satirizing the operations of both its actual and its virtual communities: “the AHP was more interested in social formations than books of poetry or ideas in poetics” (Friedlander 32).
The project first began as a series of anonymous posts to the Poetics list in 1995, which took the form of “news briefs, modeled in style and format on those of the ‘clari.* news hierarchy’” (Friedlander 71). Later, the posts (which originated from a variety of sources, but were all posted anonymously) took the “alt.fan.silliman” format mentioned above. In reprinting some examples from these posts in *Simulcast*, Friedlander is careful to reproduce the diacritical and identifying marks of mid-1990s listserv protocol, as in the following excerpt from one of the fake-newsgroup postings:

```
> Subject: Fake infant formula found in > California, library says
> Copyright: 1999 by The Anti-Hegemony > Project
> Date: 15 Mar 1999 50:50:00 PST
>
> Lines: 38
>
> SAN FRANCISCO (AHP) – Fake labels
> and contents for Simulac infant
> formula were found on library shelves in northern California, Lang-Po     Laboratories GmbH, the maker of
> formula, announced late last night.
> Labels have been placed on books that falsely
> say the product contains Simulac paperback infant
> formula with irony, the company said. (Friedlander 89)
```

That Friedlander, in his post-AHP analysis, places so much emphasis on the materiality and formal details of the postings is unsurprising in light of the great influence Language writing exerted on his work. The limitations of early listserv functionality inform the postings throughout: these are not today’s word-processing programs.

The project, for all its wit, was the subject of much biting criticism and even anger from the Poetics community, which seems to have emerged on a
number of fronts: charges of plagiarism and appropriation, anger at the way the
AHP posts attempted to “hijack” the Poetics list, and irritation at the “cowardly”
nature of the anonymous posts (Friedlander 72-74). While in retrospect,
Friedlander recognizes the validity of these arguments, he also insists that the
AHP ultimately *fulfilled* the Poetics list’s original mission: “the satires sought to
extend the possibilities of innovative poetry both by questioning received forms
and values and by creating new ones” (Friedlander 32-33). This transforms the
time-worn practices of what Renato Poggioli would call agonism and
antagonism—which, for all their perceived effects, were mainly aesthetic
strategies, strategies of form—into physical, relational struggles, taking place
between people and in real time.

Intrusions into an online community’s operations—most often taking the
form of unwanted or antagonistic posts to a listserv or blog—form an interesting
focus for consideration of the initial coherence of that community. In the following
section, I will explore the ways in which one poetics-based community and its
attendant listserv—which identifies itself both avant-garde and as regionally
affiliated, with all the attendant complications of those affiliations—came into
being, expanded, and finally changed the nature of its membership in response
to a number of antagonistic interventions into the group dynamic.
4.3: “When Lucifer Fell in N. Carolina”\textsuperscript{17}: The Lucifer Poetics Group and Listserv

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to turn briefly to a detailed consideration of an actual and active community of avant-garde-minded poets in the tradition of not only Ezra Pound, Stein, and the Language writers, but also the new framework for Southern writing set forth by Bill Lavender, Hank Lazer, and others. The Lucifer Poetics Group and its attendant listserv were started in the spring of 2004—as, as more or less vaguely put forth on the main page of the list, “an affiliation of people interested in contemporary poetry with an emphasis on avant-garde, post-avant, innovative, and experimental poetry”. It goes on to qualify: “We discuss and share information about contemporary poetry and poetic events happening in central North Carolina. One focus of group efforts is our monthly meeting in which we read and discuss poems we have written and books we are currently reading” (\textit{Lucifer Poetics} 1).

I choose to examine the Lucifer Poetics Group and listserv for a number of reasons. First, its genesis and development are emblematic, as we shall see, of

\begin{quote}
What you depart from is not the way
and olive tree brown white in the wind
washed in the Kiang and Han
what whiteness will you add to this whiteness,
what candor?
“the great periplum brings in the stars to our shore.”
You who have passed the pillars and outward from Herakles
when Lucifer fell in N. Carolina.
(Pound, \textit{Pisan Cantos} 3)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} The Lucifer Poetics Group took its name, at the suggestion of poet and Lucipo member Joe Donahue, from Ezra Pound’s Canto LXXIV:
many of the most essential difficulties of both avant-garde communities in the tradition of Ezra Pound modernism and online communities of the digital era. Further, after inviting and receiving national attention as a thriving community of avant-garde poetics, the Lucifer Poetics Group finally returned to its local (North Carolina first; Southern next) identity, in spite of the multiple and conflicting commitments that avant-garde practice demands. Finally, I was present for the early days of the group’s formation, the emergence and growth of its listserv, and its eventual partial (some would say entire) dissolution. I hosted the group’s first meeting at my home, attended many of the events described here, and know most of the participants, virtually and personally, well or as acquaintances.

Like SUNY Buffalo’s Poetics list, the Lucifer Poetics list (or Lucipo) was developed as a virtual forum for an actual, physical community; however, unlike the Poetics list, which had as its organizing principle SUNY Buffalo’s poetics program, Lucipo was simply a more or less loose affiliation of friends and colleagues with a shared interest in avant-garde writing and poetics. The group’s original participants lived in and around the physical communities of Durham, Chapel Hill, and Carrboro, North Carolina; some were employed by or students of Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, or another of the many local universities and colleges. Thus, many of them had met or heard of one another before the group began, loosely, to organize meetings in the spring of 2004. The listserv was begun and maintained in May of 2004 by Patrick Herron, a poet and graduate student at UNC-Chapel Hill’s School of Information and Library Science, and Ken Rumble, the group’s organizer, who also ran the
Desert City Reading Series, through which avant-garde and innovative poets from around the country were brought to eat, drink, and read in Chapel Hill's independent bookstore the Internationalist.

By spring 2004, three main types of online entity had become normative for the distribution, dissemination, and discussion of experimental and avant-garde poetries: online poetry journals, blogs, and listservs. Each format offered its own pleasures, functions, conveniences, and limitation; few attempted to be, or, if they did attempt, succeeded in enacting, “hypertext,” in the sense that McGann, O’Gorman, Ulmer, and others theorized and explored that concept. We might also keep in mind Lev Manovich’s sense of “the loop” as a useful metaphor for the digitally-enabled practice of temporal displacement through the practice of the “database narrative…a narrative that fully utilizes many features of the database organization of data…the way to bridge linear narrative and interactive control” (Manovich 319) in film and other digital media, such as video games.

Today, however, online journals such as Word/For Word (www.wordforword.info) and Vert (www.litvert.com) accomplish little more in formal terms than traditional paper literary magazines do, except in terms of their submission practices (nearly always via e-mail) and their relative accessibility (usually free of charge, clickable, and consistently, democratically available, at least to the technologically enabled). Though the clickability of these journals do provide a certain spark—indexes of contributors’ names are hyperlinked to their work, allowing the reader to move quickly from index to poem and back—the reading practice this encourages is essentially the same as that of the flipper
through physical pages. In fact, it is possible to argue that the easily-browsed hyperlinks actually contribute to, even embrace, a culture of fast reading, even skimming. Some online journals, such as Octopus (www.octopusmagazine.com), do offer a digitally-enabled, heady, high-quality blend of rich visual and graphic design, audio, and text, and a powerful forum for multimedia collaborative efforts, but the reading practices it encourages remain fairly straightforward: click on an author or a title, encounter a page of text and other media, read and listen, return to index.

From its outset, the Lucifer Poetics Group and its listserv were challenged by the conflicting demands of the group’s multiple nature: as social hub, events organizer and publicity-generator, public discussion and debate forum, and so on. With the Desert City Reading Series providing a sort of local credibility, with the likes of Ron Silliman, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Emanuel Hocquard reading alongside less widely-known local poets, the Lucipo list soon began to attract attention on the World Wide Web. After visiting Chapel Hill to read as part of the series, Silliman mentioned the group and its listserv on his well-traveled blog, and the subscribers’ list boomed. Further, the Carrboro Poetry Festival, run for its three-year tenure by Patrick Herron, invited avant-garde and experimentally-affiliated poets almost exclusively to read, many of whom kept in touch with the “scene” they’d discovered there through the Lucipo listserv.

As for the nature of the listserv itself, overt manifestoes were avoided, as were any local or online discussions of group identity per se; membership to the list was open to all. There were few and then only oblique attempts to identify
what avant-garde or experimental writing was, much less to explore the nature of
the group’s regional or institutional influences and affiliations. For the most part,
membership was self-selecting, as avant-garde groupings often are: few poets
devoted to more “conventional” styles bothered joining, and discussion was often
lively, usually inspired by, or productive of, local readings and gatherings.

The point, as ever, was the intentional creation of a reading and writing
community devoted to avant-garde, innovative, and experimental language: as
founder Ken Rumble put it:

...people generally want to be part of a community,
they want to be welcomed by a community, and they
want to be heard by a community. I believe that
obligation is the surest way to kill motivation and
genuine interest, and that people will generally
operate for their own benefit and that community
benefit and individual benefit can be merged into one
through negotiation and clear and honest
communication. (Rumble 1)

One of the “obligations” Rumble felt was most dangerous to the idea of a free
and open literary community was, in fact, the university. As I have mentioned,
Lucipo was made possible, at least in part, by the presence of the University of
North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University, North Carolina State University,
and the area’s other, smaller colleges. The Triangle serves as home to a great
number of graduate and undergraduate students, temporary lecturers and
tenured professors; most of Lucipo’s members, including Rumble, either taught
at or attended one of these schools. Still, Rumble expresses a version of the
avant-garde artist’s characteristic mistrust of the academic environment:

And it was, for me, way better than being in grad
school because no one was at the meeting or in
Lucipo because they had to be; it was very close to being an end in and of itself which I think can be very freeing. Plus, the folks were smart and cared—in grad school there are plenty of people that don't really care. When you’re in school, being involved and reading and writing is easy, it’s what you’re *supposed to be doing*. (Rumble 2)

Thus, avant-garde poetry would be the basis of a new, self-selecting and perfectly self-regulating life outside of the academy.

In August of 2005, a poet/artist named Jim Behrle joined the Lucipo list. Behrle already enjoyed somewhat of a word-of-mouth reputation for his own Web page and blog, [www.jimbehrle.com](http://www.jimbehrle.com), in which he openly and aggressively satirizes the contemporary avant-garde poetry scene as culture of minor celebrity, acolytes, and repetition. (One of his favored satiric techniques was the comic strip, in which caricatures of contemporary poets cavorted, or in the case of the strip “Avantosaurus,” dinosaur stickers held discussions of avant-garde poetics.)

That Behrle had an agenda—indeed, believed himself to be something like the physical incarnation of the antagonistic avant-garde impulse—became quickly evident. His early posts were mainly one-liners, light, casual, full of enthusiastic homoerotic innuendo and teasing banter toward the other members of the community, and very little mention of poetry or poetics. When another member of the community exhorted the list to “CUT THE SOPHOMORIC JUNK POSTS” (Vitiello), Behrle responded succinctly: “Just to let you know—I’m pretty much gonna do whatever the hell I want. Learn how to delete or whatever you need to do to get thru it. Nice to meet you. Luv Jimmy” (Behrle “Chris V”).
It is certainly possible to ascribe much of the acrimony eventually leveled at Behrle by members of the Lucipo listserv to this type of aggression, but as Benjamin Friedlander discovered in the Buffalo Poetics List’s response to the Anti-Hegemony Project, the frustration with these calculated and very pointed “interventions” was deeply felt. It stemmed from three main objections: that Behrle’s posts were so numerous and frequently did nothing more than bait other list members, with little or no mention of poetry or poetics; that Behrle refused to adhere to the standards of good conduct and politeness implicitly held and/or explicitly stated by others on the list; and that Behrle took aim so cruelly at some of the list’s members.

Behrle’s favorite target by far was the poet Kent Johnson, who in fact practiced a very similar type of intervention into the avant-garde scene when, in the mid-1990s, he began writing and publishing poems under the name of Araki Yasusada, a fictional Hiroshima survivor who had died of cancer in 1972. For a time, Yasusada received a good deal of positive critical attention, but eventually (and with Johnson’s blessing) Yasusada’s identity and biography was revealed to be a hoax. Critical sentiment turned hostile; Wesleyan University Press, which had been under negotiations to publish Yasusada’s first book, broke the deal. The Yasusada hoax initiated a broad conversation on contemporary modes of authorship and anti-authorship, in which Johnson himself played an active part. The new mode of “hyperauthorship,” Johnson argued, would allow for greater interaction between imagination and imaginative expression, with the creation of
the author himself, not just his works, an imaginative and intellectual product.\textsuperscript{18}

Yet in spite of their very similar commando-style approaches to literary production and participation, Behrle directed a number of vitriolic attacks at Johnson and his perceived acolytes, using the Lucipo list (which Johnson frequented) and Behrle’s own Web site as vehicles. One major point of contention was the definition, identity, and ownership of the poetic phenomenon called “flarf”—a then-emerging practice of performing Google searches on

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{18} In an interview published in the online literary magazine \textit{Vert}, Johnson puts it thus:

I believe there will be, in this future and broad-based "refusal to be regimented from the outside," a more subtle and fluid relationship with poetic identity as legally and culturally, even biologically, circumscribed. And in this resistance to regimentation the circulation of created, fully-realized hyperauthorships will become a vibrant and branching and authentic utopian space, with schools and collaborations, journals and sub-genres, critical forays and epistolary crossings. I think that readers will flock to this apocryphal space and jump in, grateful to abide in mystery and to pursue the traces, clues, and revelations its authors leave behind. Poets both real and not real will move in shimmering ways back and forth between realms and across times. Cross-disciplinary forms and genres unimaginable at present will flower forth. It will be a "wavy" zone impossible to appropriate or to discipline, because authorship in this topography will not have a discrete location or body; it will be continuum-like, a wave, to draw from Epstein again, going across times, places, and personalities.

But this will require strong conceptual moves that leave behind the vanishing point of genetic ascription and push poetic-performative activity—sometimes illicitly and against "known laws"—beyond the generic canvass-horizon of the page.

(Friend/Johnson “Hoaxes”)
\end{quote}
chosen or random search terms and cobbling the resulting text together into poems.

Behrle continued as an active participant on the Lucipo list, openly engaging in the harshly critical behavior (characterized by personal attacks, name-calling, direct insults, and what can only be described as anger) known by participants of online communities as “flaming,” until March 2006, when increasing frustration from other list members led him to make a number of cryptic comments regarding his intention. Patrick Herron questioned Behrle’s motives in the following post, dated March 2, 2006:

When someone wants to examine violence, normally they don’t attempt to provoke it. Doing so wholly lacks in civility, as we all know. Of course, performance art projects often strive to break those barriers.

What do you see as the value of flame wars on email lists? Flame wars are of course very different than heated intellectual discussions. How would you distinguish email flame wars from blog wars?...

My mistake was responding to you at all on Ron [Silliman’s] blog, because you exhibited a behavior of escalation, of alpha-dominance, and you have done so in the past. I should never have responded...

Has your participation on email lists, which has also shown such flame-insistent behavior, also been part of this ongoing project? Many of us love projects. We’d love to hear the details of your project, about how this all ties in with this framework of control you’re suggesting here.

Your anger problems, about which you’ve written to this list last September, which seem like a more likely explanation for your aggressive flame-inducing behaviors, is that also part of this project? (Herron “Is this…”)
Herron's response is remarkable as much for his insistence on the maintenance of “civility” in online discourse as for his heated, and very personal, response to Behrle’s antagonism.

Behrle’s response was:

In general most of my projects revolve around exploring how poets interact with one another...I'm very interested in interjecting myself into places I "don't belong."

I don't want to talk about tactics and motives right now. Escalation is certainly one. If you don't wish to participate in this project anymore, just say so. Like, I'd rather not participate in this project anymore...If you want to stop being involved you will have to put up with the cartoons I have made, which will be up tomorrow, and then it will be over. Other stuff will come down and new projects won't be started.

Past projects have been very interesting and anger has been a very keen motivating factor and source of inspiration for me. Ultimately I'm in control and responsible for all of the things I've done and written and can be held accountable: either it's good art, funny art or it's not. I leave it up to the viewers to decide. And I'm too close to it, my impressions would probably spoil it.

(Behrle “Hey Patrick”)

Behrle left the list shortly after the confrontation; he would return for a short time in September of 2006, only to be shut out by the decision of Lucipo co-founder and list moderator Ken Rumble to close the list’s ranks and archives to poets living and working in North Carolina. In the 16 days Behrle spent on the list in September 2006, he posted 40 times, often in mocking response to Kent Johnson’s even-more-frequent posts.
Local reaction to the argumentative direction the listserv was taking was mixed. Ken Rumble, on the one hand, remained optimistic, casting the flame wars as a necessary development of passionate debate:

...people are passionate about these things and they're not necessarily nice, and even academic debate—which strives for rationality—is always infused with emotion and passion. So the fact that people got upset on every side was really no surprise to me, and honestly, I don't even think that the resulting tension or bad feelings were bad. God, it would be a boring damn world if people didn't get their shit shook up sometimes. (Rumble 8)

Murat Nemet-Nejat, a Turkish poet who joined the list after meeting Patrick Herron on the Buffalo Poetics List (with which Nemet-Nejat had become disillusioned), openly welcomed the wars, embracing the generative power of conflict:

I think the “flarf wars” was the high point of Lucipo Listserv during my time there, a significant, resonant moment in the history of American poetry; I believe it will be seen that way. This is so because the flarf wars went beyond literary criticism. It brought to the surface the underlying passions, dreams, assumptions, values around which poetry gets written, when poetry does matter. In its glorious state, poetry may evoke anger or moral outrage because it is important...Having friends and poets I admire on both sides, I am saddened by what happened...I wish the arguments had caused less pain, particularly in Patrick. (Nemet-Nejat 6)

Both Rumble’s and Nemet-Nejat’s reaction to the events do implicitly recognize the personal nature of the attacks and the group members’ responses. Indeed, the Lucipo phenomenon enacts the intersection between the personal, the
aesthetic, and the academic in community life. In a series of interviews conducted in the spring of 2007, after the flame/flarf wars were over and the list had been made private, various Lucipo members commented on the effect personal issues—hurt feelings due to online disagreements, but also the development and dissolution of in-person romantic relationships and friendships—had on the list activities. Group member Brian Howe comments, “I guess I’m not concerned with what Lucipo could or should be; it is what it is, and at any rate at this point the group identity is indistinguishable to me from my good feelings for my friends within the group” (Howe 3).

Lucipo was also subject to accusations of sexism and croneyism, much as the Language movement, or moment, had once been. To explain the genesis of this dynamic, Rumble describes a sort of core group made up of four sets of couples whose relationships were the foundation of the Lucipo social circle in its early days, and whose structure was not particularly forgiving to certain members:

The problem, though, was that women entering Lucipo—particularly single women—did not always feel welcomed by our girlfriends. And since our girlfriends weren’t exactly involved in the intellectual or artistic side of Lucipo, the group ended up being male dominated. I say the girlfriends weren’t involved and that’s true, but that wasn’t because they were being excluded. (Rumble 5)

Whether or not this was the direct cause of the gender disparity within the Lucipo ranks, such a disparity was perceived and commented on by a number of the female members. Reb Livingston, editor of the online poetry journal The No Tell Motel (www.notellmotel.org), argues,
For as “forward thinking” or “progressive” or however you want to describe how Lucipo presented itself, it operated very traditionally in regard to its women members. It created its own mainstream that left the majority of the female members in the fringes. There were a handful of brash, outspoken women who carved roles for themselves and were accepted at different levels, but the majority of the women were kind of looked over, their posts ignored or they never found an appealing or productive opening to join in. (Livingston 2)

She does note that “it’s probably unfair to hold Lucipo to a higher standard” (Livingston 3), but was still deeply disappointed by the “gratuitous cockfights and personal attacks” (Livingston 2) that eventually developed on the list. The male members of the listserv and community were defensive to various degrees (Nemet-Nejat wonders, “I do not understand why the women members should choose to define themselves in this passive light” (Nemet-Nejat 10)), but the question remained unanswered. Rumble argues:

There’s a gender disparity in all avant-art movement communities, there’s sexism and disparity in society at large—why should Lucipo be held to some higher standard?, women and men behave and interact within community differently—why should we expect those larger trends to cease at Lucipo’s door? etc. (Rumble 8)

Rumble’s attempts to remain apolitical on the subject are characteristic of the way the community handled the question. My intentions here are mainly descriptive, not pejorative, although it is important to note that members’ opinions here divided, for the most part, neatly down gender lines. It is true that the founding members’ intention in the creation of the list was not overtly political; however, any affiliation with the tradition of American avant-garde writing,
particularly under the shadow of Gertrude Stein and the Language writers, begs the feminist question.

The notion that an online community is subject to precisely the same infighting, struggles for rank, and personal issues that are part of any physical community is not particularly surprising. However, we might consider whether the medium of the listserv offers anything beyond the virtual bulletin board or a transcription of conversations that would have taken place anyway. Obviously, the listserv takes conversation out of real time; it allows forethought and editing; it removes the physical relationship between speaker and listener; and, possibly most importantly, it turns conversation-acts immediately into documents, which are then immediately archived. On the Lucipo list, each post is immediately added to an archive and cannot be edited or deleted after the fact. To make use of one of N. Katherine Hayles’ insights about digital poetries, the listserv is a “machine to organize time” (Hayles 181).

It is not the intention of this study to determine whether an online community is in fact a “real” community, an online conversation is a “real” conversation, or a friend met online is a “real” friend. In the world of digital media, these issues are probably moot; e-mail, text messaging, blogging, and message board posting are accepted and persistent modes of communication, and it’s no more use making value-statements about them than it was to make similar statements about the advent of the telephone. Yet the question of the immediate archive is fascinating in light of the relationship between literary work, the Web,
and the archival function explored in Jerome McGann’s and others’ work with online and digital media, community, and communication.

The moment at which an online communication—which on the Lucipo list may have been anything from a one-line quip to a member’s newest poem to a polemic—is lifted into the archive and essentially transformed into literature is a powerful one, and recalls Barthes’ discussion of the “edge” between literature and pornography played so well by Sade. The intensity of this moment is too often overlooked; I dare say that listserv participants are not, by and large, aware of the transgressive potential of each of their contributions to the list—and it is so only if we consider what is happening behind each posting, behind each communicative act. Each post becomes, in essence, part of an ongoing literary work, a generically flexible and continually updated text. Since we have seen that in the avant-garde tradition poetry, poetics, and criticism are, by virtue of their association with their predecessors, deeply linked, interdisciplinary, multimedia, and genre-bending, this text, too, performs those functions. I do not argue that such a listserv should be more aware of this potential; it is, in part, in its lack of self-awareness that it reaches that potential. Still, a listserv founded to promote the aims and interests of American avant-garde poetry and poetics in the tradition set into motion by the high modernists cannot help becoming an example of the very poetry and poetics about which it writes. Risking the exuberant optimism so characteristic of the avant-garde, we might say that in a sense, the online community is a text about community.
As mentioned above, in the spring of 2006, Ken Rumble took the Lucifer Poetics List private and closed its membership to anyone outside of North Carolina. Rumble himself shrugs off the importance of geographical affiliation in the aesthetic sense:

> The specific geographic location was pretty irrelevant to me. I lived in the Triangle in North Carolina—I wanted a poetry community, so I tried to find/create one where I lived. That said, it was important, or rather, I was proud that such a thriving and engaged community came together in what the rest of the poetry world thinks is fucking nowhere. And it’s funny because of course Black Mountain College was here in NC, but that fact is ignored or unconsidered by anyone outside of NC. (Rumble 8)

Rumble’s reference to North Carolina’s Black Mountain School provides a sort of philosophical lineage for his conception of the group, but the question of its relationship to Southern, or southern, poetry is rarely addressed. The question, thus, is not “What does it mean to us to be Southern poets?” but “Why should we call ourselves Southern poets?” Indeed, few of the group’s founding members were native North Carolinians or even Southerners. Lucipo was not Another South; those were not its intentions, and it never attempted an explicit statement of aesthetics on the level of Hank Lazer’s.

Still, the list was formed to serve a physical and local community with a shared interest in innovative poetics; and it eventually closed its ranks to geographical outsiders. The gesture was clear: the list was no longer serving the needs of the community for which it was built, and indeed, many of the group’s founding members had stopped participating or cancelled their subscriptions. Reaction was mixed; Murat Nemet-Nejat, among others, felt Rumble’s move
closed down the liberatory potential of the online medium and ignored or subverted the open communication and profound inclusiveness that were the purposes and imperatives of the World Wide Web. Others welcomed the shift and returned to active participation. By the fall of 2007 the list had returned to something like its early format, bustling with activities, announcements of readings and parties, and lively discussions—none of which have concerned themselves with regional identity. Can it be that the ubiquity of the Web for the contemporary avant-garde (or “post-avant,” though that designation implies a departure from the behavior of the avant-garde that may arguably not exist) in the form of listservs, blogs, and message boards has emptied “southernness”—or any regional literary affiliation—of meaning? If so, this generation of avant-garde poets may actually, if unconsciously, be doing something new.

In the hybrid space of an online literary community—always half community, half self-conscious literary product—relationships are projects, identity is flexible, and theory is action. In spite of its eventual retreat into the relative calm of its regional identity, the Lucifer Poetics Group is revelatory of the contemporary incarnation of the avant-garde poetic community: it completes the linking of avant-garde literary practice to the publication and distribution of texts meant to represent its process. The simultaneity of interaction, the proliferation and accessibility of online publications, and the dissolution of geographic boundaries, have allowed group formation and publication, poetry and criticism, personality and politics to merge into a forum in which every statement about poetry and community helps write poetry and community.


