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Manuel Brito

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Introduction

- 1 It is true that the simple question “what is language?” has grounded most of the American poetic avant-garde since 1970. Steve Evans establishes the fact that “this question was in every way a *live* one, inspiring theory and practice, sparking debate and catching imaginations, changing the way many American poets wrote and read.” (Evans S., 2001-2002: 650) If this was the starting point, the fact that writers of this exploratory poetry, like Charles Bernstein, Steve McCaffery, Barrett Watten, Lyn Hejinian or Bob Perelman, published critical books in academic presses¹ was one clear sign that the very notion of marginalization could no longer be applied to their poetry and poetics. Moreover, these poets also succeeded in developing a Language theory that “makes the *formal* heterogeneity of aesthetic experience look unitary and universal in its reduction of language to material inscriptions (which, in turn, are irreducible) and its claims that such

a reduction has an ideological significance.” (Marriott D., 2003: 343) These writers reached institutional acceptance, but also over-invested in signification clearly leading them to an intermingling with other international authors.

Poetry anthologies and the internationalization of avant-garde explorations

- 2 Certainly, some anthologies contributed to intensifying international cultural pluralism and diversifying poetic modes that coexisted with and complemented each other. They definitely moved in a cosmopolitan direction, influencing foreign approaches, and transnationalizing similar poetic avant-garde explorations in the last decades of the 20th century. By working out and showing up conventions of intelligibility in a wider cultural frame, the editors of these compilations were concerned with the “politics of the referent” in the various relations between language and ideology. This was the case, for instance, with the two-volume anthology, *Poems for the Millennium*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris and published by the University of California Press in 1995 and 1998 respectively, and Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery’s *Imagining Language: An Anthology*, published by MIT in 1998. These anthologies were mostly concerned with a globally decentered revision of twentieth-century poetry from the perspective of its many avant-gardes all over the world.
- 3 In any case, to establish some points of reference for a global avant-garde community in the late 20th century, we can mention some basic concepts such as Barrett Watten’s rejection of “transparent internationalism” and the Language poets’ insistence on “the immanence, particularity, and even obduracy of language.” (Watten B., 2003: 348) Challenging the persona-centered writing, language poets have met their foreign partners, as exemplified in (among many other compilations) *Assembling Alternatives* that is “grounded in European post-structuralist theory, it recognizably links art communities in North America and their British, Irish and Australian counterparts (as well as with other non-Anglophone constituencies not treated in this book).” (Huk R., 2003: 2-3) Watten has indeed gone further and favoured the fruitful differences between languages, cultures, and literary studies, rather than reproducing the once-vaunted universal translatability of the Surrealist image/object.² Furthermore, he also has reacted against the modernist avant-garde considered essentially cosmopolitan and metropolitan in its opposition to the old order, as Raymond Williams recounts:

There was intense competition but also radical coexistence in the great imperial capitals of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Petersburg, and also, in more limited ways, in London. These concentrations of wealth and power, and of state and academy, had each, within their very complexities of contact and opportunity, drawn towards them those who most opposed them. The dynamics of the imperialist metropolis were, then, the true bases of this opposition. (Williams R., 1989: 60)
- 4 Indeed, English-speaking countries besides the U.K. also contributed greatly to the international diffusion of innovative American poetry and poetics. For example, a New Zealand magazine, *Splash*, dedicated a special issue to Language poetry in December 1984, featuring an anthology of the American poets Craig Watson, Charles Bernstein, Johanna Drucker, and Larry Eigner, together with the New Zealand experimental poets Roger Horrocks, Leigh Davis, Tony Green, Judi Stout, and Alan Loney. This magazine was not officially funded by an academic institution, although at least two of its editors, Horrocks

and Green, were teachers at the University of Auckland. *Splash* only lasted for two years (1984-1986) but the poems the editors published reflect the experimentalism that was related to the early 1980s Auckland University campus readings. It worked, coincidentally or not, on issues of language and ideological reception that were clearly akin to the Language poets, and included other avant-garde forms like performance. This new ground, working with poststructuralist ideas,³ made *Splash* a unique publication platform for some of the most experimental writers of poetry from New Zealand and elsewhere. As a continuation of other online services in some English-speaking countries, the University of Auckland hosts the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre, which aims at promoting exchange and providing various resources to readers, authors, and researchers. The center's magazine, *KA MATE KA ORA: A New Zealand Journal of Poetry and Poetics*, arose from that special issue of *Splash* on Language poets, showing the powerful influence of this literary tendency in non-U.S. poetry circle.

- 5 Australia also joined this resolve to publish special sections or issues of magazines devoted to innovative American poetry. *Meanjin* (1991) anthologized six Language poets, with Michael Greer's opening essay highlighting their role in revitalizing the American avant-garde writing and expressing how he was "fundamentally altered by my immersion in Language poetry over the past five or six years. 'Reading' is now, for me, a far more complex and difficult activity [...] Perhaps one the greatest strengths of Language poetry is that it teaches us to read anew." (Greer M., 1991: 154-155) And Sigi Curnow's closing article historicizes the relevant Australian involvement in experimental writing that connects with American Language poets:

Experimentation with language and with subject positions is not therefore a newly imported phenomenon; it has indigenous roots in local experimental performance art, concrete poetry and sound poetry of the 1960s and 1970s [...] the impulses governing Language poetry exist in all writing practices, with profound implications for our histories, cultures and languages." (Curnow S., 1991: 172, 177)

- 6 *Meanjin* is supported by the University of Melbourne, which during its existence has had a historical determination to present the problematics of contemporary thinking, be it on literature or other art forms. In that it is supported by Australian and international contributors, whose works are carefully intermingled within the range of innovation. This magazine follows the structural line analyzed here, aimed at animating varied encounters.
- 7 This innovative American presence in Australian little magazines marked a turn away from the previous American influence on the so-called Generation of '68, derived from Donald M. Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* and Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry*. Philip Mead defines this influence as "an expression of a rising antagonism to the existing Australian tradition." (Mead P., 2003: 171) The new "aura" favoured people work together and demarcated its postmodern territory by differing from the old poetries that preceded it. John Tranter and Pam Brown's electronic magazine, *Jacket*, has also definitively opted for promoting this kind of innovative poetry. *Jacket* was founded in 1997 and has been sponsored by the Australian Literary Management. After 13 years of Australian editorship and 40 issues published—some 900 pages long, like issue 39—the entire archive of *Jacket* will be moved to the University of Pennsylvania servers in 2011 and will be re-named *Jacket2*, with a new publisher, Al Filreis, and Michael S. Hennessey as the new editor. Nevertheless, the still-operating site for this magazine, <http://jacketmagazine.com/00/home.shtml>, assures that their archive

will be perpetuated through Australia's free Internet Archive at the National Library of Australia. Apparently, the decision to cease publishing *Jacket* in Australia is due to the editor's retirement and again proves that location is not definitive for the active development of avant-garde poetry. In any case, this magazine has not published special sections on Language poetry, unlike most of the magazines I analyze in this essay, although it has featured Language poets like Clark Coolidge (in 2001), Kathleen Fraser (in 2004), and Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman and Susan Howe (in 2010). Finally, I should recall the establishment of the Australian Poetry Center, which was launched in 2007 and runs parallel to other centers of this kind in the U.S., U.K., and New Zealand, works toward a constructive alliance between the poetry community in Australia and overseas.

The circulation of American innovative poetry outside the Anglophone world

- 8 In France, the magazine *Change* (1982) featured "L'Espace Amérique," gathering the work of six Language poets divided into several sections, including: "Introduction collective au mouvement de Language Poetry," "Un genre," "Paragraphes divers de chacun sur tous," various poems by the six poets, "Politique de la poésie," and Nanos Valaoritis' essay offering an overview of this tendency. It is interesting to note that all six invited authors were editors of little magazines or small presses, supporting the view that the dawn and acceptance of innovative poetry needed these venues for the construction and dissemination of a new poetics. Indeed Steve Benson's piece, "Les relations synchroniques," points out just how fundamental is the use of various means of production and interaction:

[...] la reconnaissance critique ou emphatique qu'ils apportent aux anthologies de revues, aux lectures en public, aux entretiens et aux performances, comme travail objectif et signifiant, manifeste une façon positive de valoriser, entre des parties engagées dans des actes de littérature, le paramètre d'interaction. (Benson S., 1982: 154)

- 9 *Change* served to present an alternative way of writing poetry, but interpreted as an exchange of models that took the assumptions and values of both innovative American poetry and European postmodernism as globally applicable.⁴ Nanos Valaoritis departs largely from the presumption that this collaboration was a decisive step in contemporary literature:

Il s'agit donc sans doute d'un écart peu usuel aux USA. Une prolifération de l'expérimental sans précédent dans les pays européens, et sans doute tributaire d'idées européennes, mais aussi profondément américaines qu'on puisse le faire, en ce moment où la technologie et les influences se rencontrent et produisent des remous inhabituels, dans un pays où la géographie et l'avance technologique conspirent pour faire venir à l'existence un véritable réseau d'écriture nouvelle. (Valaoritis N., 1982: 161)

- 10 As Charles Borkhuis puts it, by the late 1970s and early 1980s there were plenty of parallels between the French and American avant-garde poetries. What he calls French "late Surrealism," as practiced by poets such as Joseph Guglielmi or Jean Davie, is somewhat connected with the Language poets in their "attempts to decenter the idea of the self-as-creator," and in terms of process:

Surrealism and 'Language' poetry frequently turn an ear to the murmur of the mind as it talks to itself, often writing in a kind of automatic shorthand, marked by

continuous divergence, contradiction, association and slippage.” (Borkhuis C., 1991: 274)

- 11 So, rather than a concept of hegemony of one community over the other we can observe a continual transfer of ideas pointing to the poststructuralist theories on textuality and language.⁵ I say this because Charles Bernstein’s edition of “Language Sampler” in *The Paris Review* (1982), although published entirely in English, expressed an understanding of his “resonating of the wordness of language,” which was easily “recognized by the outside world” as J. G. points out in an introductory note to this section. (J.G., 1982: 75) In fact, Bernstein’s introduction confronts the main issues of contemporary writing as related to genre, syntax, social theory, modal properties and critique, but he especially emphasizes that the work collected in this special issue of *The Paris Review* broadens the dialogue and provides a multiply-shared response to old forms: “What we have here is an insistence to communicate.” (Bernstein C., 1982: 75)
- 12 However, the leadership in presenting this American tendency in France is held by the magazine *Action Poétique*. Two special issues were published under the titles of “Cinq Poètes Américains D’Aujourd’hui” (1986) and “États-Unis: Nouveaux Poètes...” (1989). The first one is a clear example of the collaboration between French and American poets, since four of the anthologized American poets had participated with 17 other French poets in a translation workshop, organized by the Centre Littéraire de la Fondation Royaumont in Spring 1986. It was a truly active form of experience since the same authors were involved in the translations of the poems into French. This kind of collaboration tells us much about the integration of textual practice which lies beyond geographical limitations or hegemonic perspective. Emmanuel Hocquard and Claude Royet-Journoud co-edited the 1989 issue of *Action Poétique* devoted to American Language poets. Both had been involved in anthologizing American poets’ writing in the 1960s, either for the magazine *Delta* (1981) or the bilingual two-volume anthology *21+1 American Poets Today* (1986), the latter of which already included many Language poets. Later on, these editors would continue with their interest in innovative American poets through the anthology *49 +1 nouveaux poètes américains* (1991). In both cases, Hocquard highlights their contribution to a kind of universality whose discursive strategy is appropriate in any avant-garde: “la mobilité, la liberté et le dynamisme de cette poésie en rupture avec les modèles formellement et idéologiquement conservateurs, toujours bien vivants aux États-Unis comme ailleurs.” (Hocquard E., 1989: 4)
- 13 Various French poetry centers are also involved in promoting avant-garde poetry and comparative studies. For example, the CIPM: Centre International de Poésie *Marseille*, founded in 1990, is a space of encounter for French and foreign poets, offering activities like translation workshops, exhibitions, and writers-in-residence programs. Alongside, the Centre de Poésie et Traduction: Fondation Royaumont was also founded in 1990 and remains today as a European network for experimental cooperation. Research and professional training are also encouraged through its activities, which are not only limited to literature but also embrace other arts. All this cannot but imply the significant internationalism of contemporary poetry and exemplify how plurality-oriented tendencies have significantly emerged to challenge old values.
- 14 I have also been personally involved in the edition of some special issues focusing on Language poets within the Spanish literary milieu. In 1988, on a visit to San Francisco State University, I was fortunate enough to meet Larry Price. The primary intention of my visit was to consult the holdings of The Poetry Center at this university, especially the

material related to the San Francisco Renaissance and the Berkeley Renaissance writers. To my great surprise, Price immediately drew my attention to some poets of the Bay Area who had written extensively in the 1970s and 1980s. His talks on the convergence of some poststructuralist concepts and poetry, language and ideology influenced on me and I could not resist seeking out these poets' texts and reading their poetics. The following year, Price and I co-edited a special issue of the academic journal *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* (1989), under the title of "Recent American Poetry and Poetics." Eighteen innovative American poets, including the scholars Marjorie Perloff and Donald Wesling, presented poems, essays, letters and an interview explaining the mechanisms of their work as a multiple discourse which interweaved politics, philosophy, linguistics, autobiography, and common sense. I should acknowledge that Larry Price was the prime mover in articulating the different processes of this edition, since he located authors in New York and San Francisco and ensured the high academic standard of this issue. In order to better understand the significance of this special issue, I must insist that the poets' contributions were not revisionist of their own 1970s and 1980s work, but rather served to shed light on their continual re-examination of their writing practice.

- 15 Ten years later I presented 21 essays by innovative American poets translated into Spanish in the commercial magazine *Nerter* (1999). Under the general title of "Poética americana reciente," these short essays on Language poetics served to present these poets to a broader Spanish audience. Since this magazine is distributed in Spain, some other European countries and Latin America, my intention was to launch an issue that embraced the fundamental theoretical tenets of this historical group, favouring the inclusion of comparative approaches. By then, I had corresponded with many of the members of this tendency, especially through my editorial work at the small press Zasterle, which has published the work of Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Larry Price, Lyn Hejinian, Kit Robinson, Carla Harryman, and Barrett Watten among others. My introductory essay in *Nerter* sketched out the new epistemology, its scope, and the learning these poets stimulated in their readers around the turn of the century.⁶ I continued this effort to present the Language poets' work commercially into the Spanish-speaking world through the edition of two special sections in the magazine *La Página*, "4 poetisas americanas" (1996) and "Poesía reciente americana" (2004), not so much to refocus on these poets' philosophical complexities, as to acquaint Spanish readers with the positive cross-national and cross-cultural significance of this poetry. Indeed, Esteban Pujals Gesalí had already featured another section, called "Poesía última norteamericana," on the pages of *La Página* in 1990. His introductory note to his translations of these poets' work into Spanish pointed out the indeterminacy of this kind of poetry. Although he tried to find similar writing techniques and intellectual correspondences between these Americans and some Spanish poets like José Miguel Ullán or I. Prat, the truth is that such a comparison becomes problematic since different types of discourse are being implemented.
- 16 In Asia, some readers have also had the opportunity to read Language poetry translated into Japanese. The special issue of the magazine *Gendaishi Techo* (1988), entitled "Language Poetry," anthologized the work of Ron Silliman, Michael Palmer, and Lyn Hejinian. Since I cannot read Japanese script, the apparent exoticness or distance of its signifiers incites one to explore the visual aspect of the characters. This also forces the reader to "decolonize" the dialogue and delve further into East-West cultural variations. Another manifestation of the impact of the Language poets in Japan can be seen in scholarly

essays on their work, which have appeared in university-based publications like Ralph J. Schulte's "Reading Meaning: Language Poetry and the 'Other Tradition'," published in *Fu-Jen Studies* (1993), which confirm the interest in sharing these poets' body of critical discourse in some Eastern universities. These few examples in Asia just serve to show the international dynamism of innovative American poetry.

- 17 Writing including overviews and in-depth research into Language poetry can also be seen in other European nations. For example, Igor Drobyshev published in *Soviet Life* magazine (1990) his account of the conference called the Summer School, which included participants from the Language group, as well as poets and critics from Poland, France and the USSR. This conference not only implied a challenge to the late Soviet state, but was also an excuse for encounter and collaboration. Drobyshev depicts these American poets as always "smiling, making friends—still loving it all," (Drobyshev I., 1990: 21) highlighting their collaborative literary friendship. Already before this successful conference, Language poet Lyn Hejinian had entered into contact with some Soviet poets, especially Arkadii Dragamoschenko, to collaborate on translations and various editorial projects, asserting a spirit of two-way conversation and appealing for a world poetry awakening. This same praxis could be seen in Italy with essays like the one by Larry Smith, published in the magazine *Nuova Corrente* (1988), which proposed a stronger presence of avant-garde modes in Italian poetry, such as those that American poets had developed in the 1970s and 1980s, and which might be used as a bridge towards a United States of Europe. His concluding statement notes that the agitating perspectivism he saw in the U.S. could be valid for the Italian scene: "Il brontolio degli ultimi tempi, per lo meno come io lo interpreto, mi porta a credere che stiamo per inoltrarci in un periodo di agitazione e stimolanti novità che ci farà dimenticare in fretta la palude degli anni ottanta." (Smith L., 1988: 154)

Conclusion: the rise of international poetic communities

- 18 This involvement of innovative American poets in various international circles broadened their experience and practice of community. To share concerns with other writers and readers was a natural impulse derived from the importance of hearing, speaking and writing language. As mentioned above, poststructuralist ideas aided in these poetic practices but also raised ideological issues which were enormously centripetal and significant in late 20th-century society.⁷ International communities both absorbed and intervened in re-establishing innovation as a necessary starting point from which to confront the act of writing and the ideology influencing it. Rather than an Americanization exerted through the edition of special issues devoted to American poetry in various countries, this was an exchange that took the form of multiple dialogues. Innovative American poets have published in other countries' magazines, travelling to international conferences and readings, or inaugurating poetry centers.⁸ Their purpose was not merely to increase dissemination but to participate decisively in the peculiar pleasure of poetic creation, understanding the necessity of contacts with other poets and disciplines. My impression is that the ultimate satisfaction is produced when such a model of action continues to work and reach ever larger communities.

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NOTES

1. For example, they have extensively published in academic press such as the University of Chicago, Harvard, Northwestern, Wesleyan, the University of California, and Princeton.
2. Particularly, Barrett Watten refers to this aspect taken from André Breton's essay, "Surrealist Situation of the Object." See Watten's footnote 4 in his "What Is Literature? From Material Text to Cultural Poetics," *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, Romana Huk dir., Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2003, p.361.
3. Basically, I am referring to some aspects such as the centrality of individual responses to texts, non-closural way of reading, opposition to grand narratives, and a strong emphasis on signifiers rather than their commodification.
4. As in the case of Jean François Lyotard's critique of oppressive "grand narratives," Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein have focused on a rethinking of canons with a writing that "presses questions about the taken-for-grantedness of self-expression and the discreteness of (or need to contextualize) individual works, [...] and about the relation between writing and ideology in the construction (and contesting) of meaning." Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and Andrew Ross. "From Reinventing Community: A Symposium on/with Language Poets," *Aerial* 9, 1999, p. 215.
5. Reciprocal transfer is corroborated with the significant presence of French innovative poets such as Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud or Emmanuel Hocquard in diverse American presses focused on innovative poetry.
6. See Manuel Brito, "El fluir de la poética americana: una introducción," *Nerter* 1, 1999, p.8-12.
7. Among others, these language poets' publications include essays on the connection between poetic practice and ideological issues: Bruce Andrews, *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis*, Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1996; Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992; Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence*, New York: Roof Books, 1987; and Barrett Watten, *Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences*, Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2016.
8. Likewise, American editors Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop have established channels of reception of innovative poetries in other languages, particularly two series of translation: *Serie d'écriture* and *Dichten*, focused on French and German poetries respectively. This strengthens the argument about a dialogue on equal terms.

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article traite de la réception internationale de la poésie américaine des Language Poets. Nous analysons et recensons les parties de revue ou les numéros spéciaux consacrés à ces poètes, les centres de recherche, les colloques ayant eu lieu en Australie, en France, en Italie, au Japon, en Nouvelle Zélande, en Russie, en Espagne et au Royaume Uni et leur rôle dans la diffusion de cette poésie en dehors des Etats-Unis. Plutôt que d'aboutir à une américanisation des autres poésies nationales, la coopération sur les traductions et les projets éditoriaux a établi une conversation plurielle qui influe sur la réception de la poésie au niveau global. De manière symptomatique, la plupart des éditeurs sont aussi des auteurs, démontrant le rôle fondamental des modes de production et de l'interactivité dans la diffusion de la poésie contemporaine. Des sources

d'inspiration communes viennent d'autres disciplines telles que la sociologie, la philosophie, la linguistique, que ces théories proviennent des deux bords de l'Atlantique ou d'ailleurs. En effet, cette stratégie cosmopolite a renforcé la poésie expérimentale nord-américaine et fondé les processus d'influence réciproque et d'exploration avant-gardiste au niveau international à la fin du 20^e et au début du 21^e siècle.

This article focuses on the international reception of American Language Poetry. We analyze and document how special sections or issues of journals, poetry centers and conferences in Australia, France, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, Spain, and the United Kingdom have been definitive in the dissemination of this kind of poetry outside United States. Rather than an Americanization of other poetics, the collaboration on translations and sharing of editorial projects in diverse countries asserted a spirit of multiple-way conversation that appealed for a world poetry awakening. Interestingly, most editors and publishers were also authors, pointing out just how fundamental has been the use of various means of production and interactive collaboration in the diffusion of contemporary poetry. Common sources of inspiration were drawn from other disciplines such as social theory, philosophy, and linguistics generated at both sides of the Atlantic, and beyond. Indeed, this cosmopolitan strategy has strengthened innovative American poetry, and grounded reciprocal influence and poetic avant-garde explorations in many parts of the world in late 20th- and early 21st-century.

Este artículo se centra en la recepción internacional de la poesía de los Language Poets estadounidenses. Se analiza y se documenta cómo secciones especiales o números completos de revistas, centros de poesía y congresos de diferentes naciones como Australia, Francia, Italia, Japón, Nueva Zelanda, Rusia, España y el Reino Unido han sido importantes en la diseminación de este tipo de poesía fuera de Estados Unidos. Esto no ha implicado una americanización de otras poesías ya que la colaboración en traducciones y la participación en proyectos editoriales conjuntos en varios países sirvió para confirmar un espíritu de conversación múltiple que demandaba el despertar de una nueva poesía en el mundo. Es interesante observar que gran parte de los editores y responsables de las editoriales que publicaban esa poesía eran al mismo tiempo autores, lo que indica lo fundamental que ha sido la utilización de los medios de producción adecuados así como la colaboración interactiva en la difusión de este tipo de poesía. Las fuentes comunes de inspiración de las que participó dicha poesía se relacionaban con la teoría social, la filosofía y la lingüística generadas tanto en ambos lados del Atlántico como en otros lugares. Precisamente, esta estrategia cosmopolita proporcionó una pujanza vigorosa en la poesía estadounidense innovadora y sirvió para asentar las bases de influencias recíprocas y exploraciones poéticas a finales del siglo XX y principios del XXI en muchas partes del mundo.

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Mots-clés : Language Poetry, internationalisme, réception, revues, coopération

Palabras claves : poesía del lenguaje, internacionalismo, recepción, revistas, colaboración mutua

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