

So-called.....

A little sketch about Language Writing from the 1970s on.

How to frame it? How to distinguish it?

Crucial distinctiveness: a radically reader-centered writing — that honors claims about the experience of the reader — “in motion” & open to self-transforming. And it does so by scoring a distinctive position for the reader’s experience — freer from predetermination, from programming, from stasis. Language at the center of the environment, with the reader’s experience at the *motivating* center. Opened up & onto bigger responsibilities, reflexive critique, discombobulation — with “fittingly” drastic methods.

(*Writing*) *Method* & (*Reading*) *Motive* are interlaced: method sustains motive; motive propels method.

So, what’s the *method* of making meaning which this more open type of reading *calls for*? And by which it gets solicited?

Here, “method” maps the features usually mentioned when people characterize so-called Language Writing:

First: on its horizontal axis of making meaning — in the shape of Time.

With pointedly disjunct results: dishonoring a linear narrative push, as well as the systematic rigors of metronome or breath or normative grammar.

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MEANING, METHOD, MOTIVE: EMPIRE & SO-CALLED LANGUAGE WRITING

Logic pulled apart,
the glue of syntax dissolved or clumping up,
time askew or moebius-like,
ricocheting words pulled off the sequential track
or squeezed together into simultaneity.

And second: its vertical axis of making meaning —
taking up (referential or expressive) Space.

With distinctively (surface-hugging) nonrepresentational signifying results:
instead of language transparent enough to let a text as a whole service illusion, or hidden fictive
depths, or description, or anecdote, or the self-expression of an author.

Texts less subordinated (horizontally) to a prior line or programming of time.
Less subordinated (vertically) to the tasks of representation or expressive signature. And motivated
by more than just “close readers” subjected to intrusive prior signifying closures.

To play out distinctively on *three* different fronts, or axes.

For the text — “by itself” — embodying a “policy” or strategy, a method sustaining a new motive —
the making of *Meaning* gets staged (horizontally) in (readable) time; & (vertically)
in (signifying) space.

The *motive* makes up a crucial third, contextual front: the *experience* solicited for the *reader* —
on an axis extending outward concentrically from the timing & spacing of meaning.
Method helps construct a *security* environment, valorizing certain types of experience
& not others.

And it forms a spectrum: from a particularized (or “surplus”) “security” environment for the reader — to the most stripped-down minimum or generic context, & going all the way to a zero degree (perhaps some proverbial “death of the reader”?). This is what “motivates” the commitment to distinctive method.

Limiting the Method / Limiting the Motive

Some methods of making meaning with time — “making time” — *structure in a high degree of closure*. Narrative regularity & grammatical decorum shut down Language’s “waywardness” of time.

And the same with methods of making meaning in spatial terms. High degrees of closure & predetermination are the problem; strategies of representation or personal expression get the blame. A pre-set (vertical) “program” of an expressive author or of a depictable world (preconstituted, but just waiting to be put “realistically” or “authentically” into words) will close off language’s active “constitution-writing” potential.

Language operating in this way — to form an environment structured by such closures of meaning — comes off as naturalizing, immobilizing, heavyhanded.

And *selective* when it comes to servicing “motive.” It only offers “security” for a certain pre-programmed mode of readership with limited readerly responsibility. Instead of calling for a different regime — of “free range” readers: in motion, taking responsibility, self-reflexively & off the grid — it confirms an experiential status quo.

The question for methodology: how far would writing need to go to escape, or to dismantle the

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support system for this shutting down of potential meaning?

How much of poetic method is fixating & suffocating? How much sustains a needlessly particularized (or surplus) security environment (or genre) of closure (which, in turn, limits whatever positive transformation for the reader we could hope for)?

How near to some stripped down, generic [or deparтикуlarized] making of potential meaning do we need to get — to show off our texts’ affinity with unconventional structures which *allow for a flowering of a different motive, a more open reader-centered experience?*

Explaining Imperialism, Prescribing Difference

To choreograph an alternative, we need to account for what is *in the way*. If the hope is to blow apart the closures of meaning, our prescription should fit, or follow logically from our account of what explanatory forces are “at stake.” This holds — either in analyzing imperialism or in charting avant-garde poetics.

And the two can connect. Or so I’m claiming. You can size up & confront the closing off of potential meaning the way you come to grips with an aggressive foreign policy.

If you want to drastically change a foreign policy — to stop a nation’s triggerhappy ways, its addiction to reducing the chances for others’ self-determination: what has to *give way*?

First, you treat these puzzling & troubling acts as intentional choices, as means to the ends which demand them.

Take the Vietnam war. Aggressive U.S. acts, like the violent escalation of the mid-1960s “make

sense” as the (logical) means to the end of a specific U.S. strategy (to save an anti-Communist pro-American South Vietnam). But this end isn’t self-explanatory. What is “at stake” (or: what happens if they fail?) Or, crudely: why bother? What deeper end or commitment can account for the strategy as a “fitting” (or logical) means?

The answer points to a set of underlying purposes, to the external environment Washington wanted to safeguard.

In the official account of the war, securing an anti-Communist South Vietnam (the strategy which “no alternative” besides violent escalation could guarantee) was something Washington’s purposes *required* — to defend the Free World, to avoid Cold War defeat. This is supposed to describe the security environment “at stake” in the strategy (& “at risk” if it fails).

A revisionist or radical account looks different. Here, the plan for the environment (which in turn requires the ambitious strategy) is to protect America’s empire & its overwhelming superiority of power.

OK — but an explanation & a prescription are tied together; you should be able to tease one out of the other. If the purpose — securing a *certain type* of environment — is driving the (hated) strategy, you’d need to sacrifice that purpose & let circumstances force it to change.

How possible is that? Ask: what is that “conducive environment” conducive to? Why does it matter so much? Or, again, crudely: why bother? Ask: what kind of society (or what motivating official paradigm of the status quo at home) seems to require it? Motive needs a “fitting” method.

In explaining policy, you trace an action (or a device) back to the underlying strategy it supports. Then trace this method back to the kind of environment which calls for it, & then trace

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this back to the motive which requires *it* for its security. Washington dubs this a commitment to self-protection shared by any imaginable sovereign state (a generic project). Critics call it a commitment to reproduce a distinctive social order & trajectory: (a non-generic or particularized — & therefore potentially controversial project).

Politically, the task is to change the policy — to make it unnecessary. For that, you need to be willing to abandon some features of this “security” environment. *But how far do you go?* Any society needs a *basic* or *generic* kind of security. Or are you just bedeviled by the methods of guaranteeing a *surplus* security environment? — with methods that only seem excessive if the reference point is a stripped-down model of “the national interest,” but which seem smartly tailored to help reproduce a *very specific* paradigm for society.

(Here, notice how *radicalizing* anti-war sentiment & analysis can be — barreling down through these levels of implication to challenge our complacency about the very design of the “homeland” that Washington is supposed to be protecting.)

Choice or Necessity?
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With this analysis, you reverse the sequence of official choice.

Foreign policymaking *begins* with an (explicit or implicit) paradigm of the domestic society the leaders want to secure. Then they figure out what external patterns do or don’t offer a *conducive environment* for this social order. *Then* they figure out what specific strategy can protect that pattern (or, flipping it around, what policy they can’t let fail). And finally, they figure out the details (or the devices) needed to guarantee the strategy’s success.

If the method “tightly fits” the motive, this cuts both ways. If the policy fails, the motive can’t be sustained. But if the motive is challenged or recalibrated, then the method may have the wind taken out of its sails. And prove unnecessary.

What is “at stake” in securing a fitting environment (or world order)? If a *generic* domestic context or paradigm depends upon it, then you can’t afford to fail. Necessity, not choice. Because, sooner rather than later, you’d face a death threat. Failure as “surrender” & as suicidal extremism.

But in the Vietnam era, many radicalized anti-warriors came to see that the war policy was *not* generic. Justificatory claims of generic “national defense” didn’t hold up. Instead, only a very distinctive *capitalist* motivation seemed to be at stake; only a particular configuration (of economic, political & ideological or cultural patterning at home) *required* — could not live without — that “security.”

If the environment *warrants* the policy, then being willing to embrace a dramatically different environment is the key to relinquishing (or delegitimizing) the method. But what’s the fallout? To reject some of its features — the ones safeguarding the distinctive motive or paradigm — you expose that paradigm (& its surplus, non-generic choices) to the circumstances which can force it to change. *That’s* what’s at stake.

To demand a different method, you’re saying (implicitly): whatever this policy protects will also have to change — not just the outside environment, but the motive itself.

With Vietnam, the *particularized* official paradigm is the motive. A certain version of capitalist life feeds off this environment. So it makes sense to *blame that system*. You need to struggle to create a different motive — & a *different system* — one that doesn’t *require*, as its

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security milieu, a blank check for chronic war. For many anti-warriors, this pulled them logically to *the Left*: not to “anti-Americanism” or any desire to harm the mere or “basic” nation, but to a radical critique of the status quo whose features were actually “at stake.”

This is the same way I’m talking about poetics

As a prescription, we could jettison most of what passes for convention in poetic method.

But what if we focus in on the positive consequences for *reading* — & ask how far we should go in dismantling the support structure propping up those methods?

The poetry landscape is certainly littered with overwrought & restrictive acts or devices: transparent language, persona-centering, lulling continuity, storytelling epiphanies, etc. These work as *means*, to back up an overall *end* which is “at stake” — a strategy of choreographing closures of meaning in time & space. In turn, we could “explain” this “policy” as a means to a deeper end: of guaranteeing a certain kind of “security” *environment* for language — which is what’s “at stake” or “at risk” in those conventional strategies for making (& closing off) meaning.

Again, we could chart language’s different “security environments” on a spectrum: with a generic or basic degree of closure at the middle, flanked by extremes of surplus (or particularized) closure at one end, & completely unstructured or deformed or asignifying indeterminacy at the other.

Also, language environments are selectively conducive. They support a certain position for reading on a surrounding contextual axis: the equivalent of a *motivating paradigm*. Ask: what mode of reading is “at stake” in the degree of closure.

Language environments of at least a generic degree of closure (& predetermination) make it possible to explore the *minimum* dynamics of a reading position. A generic baseline of readability (& readerly “sovereignty”) is “at stake” in their security.

If you collapse all of language’s forms & structures of closure, you dash the prospects for *any* imaginable kind of reader position. *Reading itself* is “at stake” & vulnerable to extremist attacks on the basic operations of language. (Or to any totalizing indifference to language as a *medium*.)

A language environment with some (surplus) closure will support a variety of particularized contexts for the reader — some complicit, fixed & interpellated; some resistant, self-reflexive & in motion. That is: distinguishing features of the reader’s position & experiences are “at stake” in how much (& in *what kind*) of a surplus environment our writing strategies help shape. And those features can be explored, defamiliarized & remotivated.

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A different pre-history

If we think back to the atmosphere of the 1960s & 1970s, with tasty conformist verse upholstering a status quo while Washington catapulted the nation into war.

A historical question parallels to the question of method: how far would avant-garde poetry need to go? — at that time or beyond, to escape the closed traps of predetermination (of meaning & reading).

One customary map of the lineage of so-called Language Writing highlights the New American Poetry

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of the 50s & 60s [that itself expanded out from the Pound/Williams heritage of American modernism (& animated it with some recovered prewar voicings)]. This usually positions Language Writing along the same lines, but a bit more open & drastic: continuing to flatten out the vertical projections (of voice & depiction) & scrambling the horizontal “scheduling” (of syntax & story) *even further*.

But that map is too limited. Something else also enters the viewfinder for adventurous poets coming of age in the 1970s: the even more drastic styles of resisting closure developed in the late ’50s & ’60s, *outside* of the New American Poetry. (Inspiring examples came from Fluxus, from Concrete & Sound Poetry, from Happenings & Judson dance performances, from Minimalism & Post-minimalism & Conceptual Art, from Cage & Mac Low & Andre & Acconci & Coolidge & others.)

This amounted to an “Extremist Writing” with its own alternative heritage, pieced together from (among other things):

First, ties to prewar (U.S. & European) experimental art & literature.

Second, the incitement of “the street” — of political & social revolt against the horrors of state policy & propaganda.

And third, an embrace of the methods of the era’s radical cross-disciplinary art — acting out the avant-garde trajectories of *other media* on less familiar literary terrain, with striking results in the *un*-making of either time-based or spaced-based meaning.

Some of this 60s “extremism” — like its cousins in the neighboring avant-garde worlds of music, visual art, & performance — collapses either (or both) the vertical & horizontal axis of meaning all the way to a vanishing point. As if only a full assault on meaning would suffice. And, by doing so, works the same reduction or destruction on any language environment conducive to an underlying motive or paradigm — *of reading*.

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For an adventure like so-called Language Writing, emerging in the 1970s, restless with the limits of the New American Poetry, this offers a crucial extra lineage to negotiate.

Not as an incitement to go *further*, *beyond* meaning, beyond readable language altogether — since the “zero degree” had already been surveyed. But to take inspiration from these extreme (even desperate) radicalisms & yet to go *forward* to the heart of language, with its distinctive modes of signifying & making sense.

To explore — & to make strange — the (basic or generic) capacities of a language environment: this is what’s “at stake” in the methods of more openly shaping *freer* meaning (but meaning nonetheless) out of time & out of space — out of readable sequence, out of legibility, out of semantics, out of reference. To be *language-centered*, in other words. And, at a time of social urgency, with some chance of getting leverage (at the motivating level of reading) over the powers of discourse, of rhetoric, of ideology, of myth.

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And by doing so, to *bring back to the (reading) table*, results less completely shut down on the horizontal & vertical axis: less semantically opaque or empty, less static, less paranoiac or phobic.

Not for its redemption, but at least a recovery of the (potential) wide-open possibilities of language for a (*potential*) reader.

Once we go beyond a totalizing assault on the environmental basics of language, we can work out methods to restructure that environment — to support a different context, a different underlying motive. To spur a much more generous & open embrace of the reader “in motion” — charged up & ready to go. *Si se puede*.

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