

NEW CONSIDERATIONS PROPOUNDED IN LITTLE MAGAZINES OF AMERICAN INNOVATIVE POETRY*

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ASBTRACT

During the last two decades of the twentieth century little magazines played a significant role in the American avant-garde poetic scene. The new formal considerations propounded in these magazines violated narrative style centered on the self and gave rise to fragmentary inquisitive discourses on the relationship between the individual, writing and society. We see this clearly in the works of the so-called innovative poets, in which the prevalence of a new consciousness was developed mainly through the publication of little magazines emerging in the 1970s. They favored debates among poets and intellectuals and achieved an international audience.

KEY WORDS: Little magazines, American innovative poetry, poetics, politics, self.

RESUMEN

A finales del siglo XX las pequeñas revistas americanas centradas en la publicación de poesía y poética alcanzaron una importancia inusitada. En sus páginas aparecieron nuevas proposiciones formales que se alejaban del estilo narrativo centrado en el yo y propiciaron discursos más fragmentarios tomados de diversas fuentes y que establecían una relación entre el individuo, la escritura y la sociedad. Los poetas americanos innovadores fueron los principales impulsores de esta nueva conciencia, especialmente visible a través de las pequeñas revistas que aparecieron con fuerza a partir de los años setenta del siglo XX, al tomar referencias intelectuales sólidas que le supusieron un reconocimiento internacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: pequeñas revistas, poesía innovadora americana, poética, política, individuo.

At the turn of the 20th century most of the anti-conformist writings on poetics came out through diverse little magazines, which opposed the still prevalent modernist issues in American poetry. Though Charles Olson referred in the 1950s to projective verse as postmodernist poetry, his claim was only a way of reorienting Poundian Modernism to pay closer attention to poetic composition itself. His stress on the self and on speech did not alter the central modernist features. Indeed, Donald M. Allen's anthology published in 1960, *The New American Poetry: 1945-*

1960, layered various poetic modes ranging from the Black Mountain Poets to the New York Poets, and included those associated with the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beat Generation or others with no geographical or poetic group definitions. All these miscellaneous texts (notes, reflections, essays, or poems) shared Olson's instant after instant commitment to reality insisting on the self, though sometimes from a far distance. Other anthologies in the 1960s encouraged critical reflection on the poetic achievement restoring Modernism through heterogeneous forms like deep image, animism, religion or primitivism. This is especially visible in Jerome Rothenberg's approach to linking Modernist avant-garde (Gertrude Stein, Kurt Schwitters) with anthropological concerns like shamanism or Jewish cultural references, as formulated in *Poems from the Floating World*. Indeed, late 1960s magazines like *Caterpillar*, *Sumac*, *Curriculum of the Soul*, *Io*, *Audit*, *Stony Brook*, *Coyote's Journal*, *Wild Dog* or *Kulchur*, also focused on a reconsideration of Modernism bearing fruits from distant sources like Jung, prehistoric archeology, surrealism, or Reichian therapy. They can be considered as publications exemplary of the intellectual challenges that openly prompted the generic revolution of the word produced in the 1970s.¹

However, during the last three decades of the twentieth century little magazines played a significant role in the American avant-garde poetic scene. The new formal considerations propounded in these magazines violated narrative style and gave rise to fragmentary inquisitive discourses on the relationship between the individual, writing and society. We see this clearly in the works of the so-called innovative poets, in which the prevalence of a new consciousness was developed mainly through the publication of little magazines in the 1970s like *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e* (Bruce Andrews & Charles Bernstein, NY), *Hills* (Michael Waltuch, IA & Bob Perelman, MA) *Oculist Witnesses* (Alan Davies, MA), *Tottel's* (Ron Silliman, CA) *Roof* (Tom Savage & James Sherry, NY); *This* (Barrett Watten, IA & Robert Grenier, MA), *A Hundred Posters* (Alan Davies, MA), *La Bas* (Douglas Messerli, MD), *Miam* (Tom Mandel, CA), *Toothpick*, *Lisbon and the Orcan Islands* (Michael Wiater, WA), *United Artists* (Lewis Warsh & Bernadette Mayer, NY), *Telephone* (Maureen Owen, NY), *Big Deal* (Barbara Baracks, NY), or *Big Sky* (Bill Berkson, CA). These maga-

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¹ Barthesian zero *écriture* liberated literature from its ideologically objective pretension. In this sense, literature is far away from the 1950s social commitment, though it needed interpretation and knowledge to insure meaning inside form and show deficiencies and possibilities. Innovative little poetry magazines in the 1970s demanded a new reader familiarized with European intellectuals, acknowledging that both literary discourse and reality are full of ambiguities leading into scepticism. Their social preoccupations were seen in their very active small communities (related to artistic activities, like New Langton Arts, or prisoners support, as developed by Ron Silliman). Little magazines were a means to exhibit these new literary and political environments, and the European intellectuals (especially Wittgenstein and Derrida) made them reaffirm the importance of the signifier and elucidate the resonances of the signified.

zines were a dynamic means to maintain the consistency of these poets' purposes. They were rapidly distributed and had faithful subscribers, they appeared frequently throughout the years and definitely helped to establish a community in which responses were direct and immediate.

It is true that most of these magazines were ephemeral, but they embodied a new writing with intellectual discoveries about the individual in society and politics. This new consciousness opposed restricted social norms and proposed a new political role for the individual, introducing new ways of interpreting and analyzing the functions of language. Normally, the term "language poetry" is associated with the barthesian *écriture*, eminently forcing critics and readers to pursue linguistic exploration and search for new roles for language.² Language poets mixed new poetic practices with new epistemologies. In this sense, poststructuralist concepts were joined by Marxism, and other values set forth by Ludwig Wittgenstein or Jacques Derrida.³ The strategies used to expose these new intellectual goals had to be effective in renewing the perception of both poetry and reality. Little magazines emerged at this level as an ideal means to publicize their new position. They first showed the complexities of language through its deconstruction and fragmentation, a reevaluation of the individual resisting domination and subverting the structures into which his society was categorized. Not in vain, issues like the Vietnam war, capitalism, economics, and language were considered as social territory in which poetry inspired the intellectual ability of individuals.

This new intellectual position was clearly based on a reevaluation of Wittgenstein's ideas on ordinary language, in which meaning is contingently individualized in both author and reader. Given the persistent attention to the writerly

² Roland Barthes asserts that "the world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place: it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature." For him, poets are more conscious of the formal character of language, based upon sign which convey form and concept, but also of a transcendence able to express absences which are lodged in the mythic (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Wang & Hill, 1972)). Characteristically enough, $L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e$'s second issue published Roland Barthes's excerpts from *Writing Degree Zero*, in which modern poetry "leaves standing only its lexical basis... The poetic word is here an act without immediate past, without environment... the consumer of poetry, deprived of the guide of selective conventions, encounters the word frontally... accompanied by all its possible associations... is reduced to a sort of zero degree." Roland Barthes, "Writing Degree Zero," $L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e$ 2 (April 1978): n.p.

³ Steve McCaffery extends the language tendency's referential sources to Russian Formalism, Roland Barthes's semioticism, the works of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida ("the sign as diacritical reference... difference... the metaphysics of absence." For him, this writing should be understood in terms like Ron Silliman's "surprised by sign," or "formalist," "structuralist," "dereferentialist," "minimalist," "language-centered," "counter-communicative," and "cipheral;" (cyphericity is defined by McCaffery as a "zero-methodology by which texts are constructed which are designed to say nothing. To be silent, however, is to withhold the possibility to speak." Steve McCaffery, "The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing," *Open Letter* 7 (Summer 1977): 64.



reader,⁴ centered on language itself, it is not surprising these poets looked further back to the early Russian formalists who first paid primary attention to writing and its formal composition. However, the innovative poets moved beyond the formal framework and realized that words convey meanings and an implicit desire for communication, transcending the merely formal and resonating in the social world. They also felt attracted by the late Russian formalists involved in the Moscow Linguistic Circle (Roman Jakobson) and in the Opoyez, the Society for the Study of Poetic Language in Saint Petersburg, in which Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum and Osip Brik researched into word formation and how it became literature. In making such a choice, these American innovative poets were fascinated by how the familiar (the ordinary in Wittgensteinian terms) should turn into strange in order to accomplish the fullest aesthetic experience.⁵ Surely, Clark Coolidge's improvisatory structures, Hannah Weiner's inside-out project, and Jackson MacLow's non-intentional method, had acknowledged this epistemological approach through their various poetic achievements before the 1970s. Nevertheless, more generalized shifts came with the advances in the 1970s through the presence of little magazines beginning with already ordinary titles like *This*, *Roof*, *Telephone*, or $L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e$, able to distort and prolong perceptions.

Thus this threading of weaving together writing and its values to make the reader aware of ordinary life is another link to Wittgenstein's philosophy. When these poets turn to language as a medium of consciousness that never mirrors the universe transparently, they make use of Wittgenstein's conception of language as an instrument that not just represents but intrinsically has meaning. In their search to redefine the relationship between self and reality, they are retaking Wittgenstein's views on how human acts and recurrent forms manifest their ontological basis.⁶ For Wittgenstein, language clarifies that the world exists, beyond it we only have nonsense. He was not interested in the problem of language evaluation but in its functioning. This is the position mostly retaken in the American innovative little magazines in the 1970s, in which published essays and critical notes argue for how

⁴ This term is derived from Tom La Farge's "writerly writers." In this sense, the "writerly reader" is involved in the process of composition as an experience of writing. Tom La Farge, "Readerly Writing," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 39 (Noviembre 1999): 93-102.

⁵ Shklovsky's phonetic and lexical investigations led him to conclude that poetic speech should be removed from the domain of automatized perception. Defamiliarization brings the greatest long-lasting impact, "By "estranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive, 1990) 6.

⁶ For Charles Altieri, Wittgensteinian essentialism remains within the complex coordinates of ordinary human experience. As seen later, Derrida retakes this issue and focuses on human acts as a play of signifiers, in which free play is only allowed within the linguistic system. Consequently, he destroys essentialist thought. For a further discussion on this topic, see Charles Altieri, "Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridian Literary Theory," *Modern Language Notes* 91.6 (December 1976): 1409.



linguistic structures (phonology, rhythm, grammar, syntax, formal arrangement) operate at an internal level and authorship is allowed to take a kind of bold interest in the creative process of any artistic activity. Moreover, to adopt Wittgenstein's ideas on language meant being aligned with scepticism, though they tried to avoid this charge by paying attention to an identification with human acts in society, "Sceptical doubt applies a kind of pressure on familiar realities that can make us aware of how our ordinary activities are in fact anchored and of how we characteristically determine meanings and values."⁷

To examine the social element in the language tendency we must resort to Wittgenstein. Literature and philosophy support each other as they refer to disciplines that reflect and analyze the possibilities of human knowledge. When both disciplines are excluded for methodological reasons, it is usually to establish that philosophy adheres to consistency, while poetry should be related to language and emotion. For Charles Bernstein, both take part in "the project of investigating the possibilities (nature) and structures of phenomena,"⁸ and he justifies this drawing on Aristotle via Wordsworth, "Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing... Poetry in the image of [humanity] and nature" (Bernstein, *Content's* 229). The differences between these disciplines might be attributed to reasons of professionalization or segmentation, but in fact both coincide in explaining phenomena (events, objects, selves, realities) and the human consciousness above them. They both also explain aesthetic and social relationships, providing an ideological and political approach to reality, a commitment observed by Linda Reinfeld as generalized in the innovative poets, when they defend the close connection between literary theory and social reality, precisely for not separating aesthetic questions from political commitment and ideological critique.⁹ Charles Bernstein's position against the Balkanization of theory is a consequence of perceiving methods of interpretation like feminism, psychoanalysis, materialism, sociology or romanticism as worldviews that tend to defend a territory or specialization. This is why all the language modes of the twentieth century are liable to appear in his poetry, from computer language or T.V. jargon to more classical poetic diction, in a tour through the most intimate and undecipherable to the most complex philosophical imperative.

For Wittgenstein, literature was an event to be shared and thus needed a nexus for the multiplicity of individual interpretations to come into contact. Despite the apparent nihilism and instability of meaning, it is easy to find frequent references in this philosopher's work to the importance of the context and the use

⁷ This position conveys a humanist approach to literature opposed to the determinist side of the method. Véase Charles Altieri, "Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridian Literary Theory," *Modern Language Notes* 91.6 (December 1976): 1398.

⁸ Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986) 219-220.

⁹ Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1992) 53.

of meaning within language, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”,¹⁰ in order to insist on language as laden with historical meanings and uses we cannot escape from. The same history or how it is narrated must be revised, not from the rhetorical point of view but by emphasizing that its role is to represent. It would be at this point when poetry and philosophy explore and facilitate multiple possibilities in constructing not a fixed theory of the individual and the social, but one bounded by the necessary critical distance. The core connection between the language tendency and Wittgenstein is given by considering language as the motor of that consciousness for interpretation. There is no automatic correspondence between signifier and signified and it is language itself that initiates us into knowledge and experience of society. Within this context I think these poets are attracted to the Wittgenstein that explains how language is associated with the nature of knowledge and gives importance to those images of our culture and community that reaffirm us as individuals in society. These poets try to go a little further, to insinuate that our relationship with the world is not just that of knowing, but of being there and acting. From this arises his enormous interest in uniting the literary with the social.

When Wittgenstein points out that “language is itself the vehicle of thought” (*Philosophical* 329) he is but stating that writing is self-knowledge and the imprint of human presence in the world. Language is also the central point for the contributors of these magazines, it is not just knowledge but action, especially for the today’s multicultural world where it is necessary to face up to and accept the diversity that so repels mass culture. For them the medium of poetry with its atmosphere of uncompleted suggestions is suitable for quoting from Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals*, capable of converting marginality into a moral question (the rebellion of the slave), considering it as an acceptance of the Other, even recurring to the ethnic, social or gender differences in order to be prepared to accept it. Therefore, the concept of writing in Wittgenstein’s or Barthes’ sense is an individual literary action inscribed in a variable context full of contingencies. Indeed Bernstein’s books on poetics, *Content’s Dream*, *A Poetics* and *My Way*, Silliman’s *The New Sentence* or Barrett Watten’s *Total Syntax*, show a succession of ideas adhering to a language conceived as the pivotal point of human experience, living it and confronting its alternatives. This offers the reader the chance to contemplate the doubts and solutions of an individual immersed in his or her context. It is also true that part of the production published in these magazines is rather schizophrenic because of the multivalency and variety of devices used, where fragmentation is one of the most recurrent resources for offering multiple values for the signifiers that are constantly being reconstructed. However the desire to solidify this practice with concrete intellectual arguments is useful to evaluate the consistency of modern poetic dis-

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 43.

course, where truth, if it exists, lies in the phenomena arising around it and does “not approximate a displaced ‘physical reality.’ They are the product of mediation through the membrane of consciousness, which is language, and hence actualizations of such a reality” (*Content’s* 123-4).

On emphasizing the importance of the social context in order to avoid skepticism in apprehension of meanings, Wittgenstein observes that “consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support.”¹¹ We must not forget that most of the contributors to these magazines were aware of them being included in a poetic line that starts off with Pound, to whom they respond by trying to supersede Modernism, investing literature and literary language with an autonomous self-referential praxis, reducible to specific codes by individuals but constantly open to reinterpretation. Thus, the purpose of poetic language is discovery, but leaving an arduous task to the reader, who feels obliged to decide how and in what direction the elements of language can be combined with the categorizations to which we are accustomed. The response does not include a re-composition of the fragmentation as in Pound, to find the creative self, but rather that language has a long history of premises and consequences that could occupy a central position as true protagonist; establishing a scenario of optional meanings. The most obvious reward and conclusion when faced with this attitude is that it submerges the reader in an open progression of language that reflects one of the most outstanding motifs of poetic experience: to experience words as raw material to be deciphered.

Jacques Derrida completes this innovative poetic position, since he also values language as an essential axis to rationalize human contingencies. It is not surprising these poets started to recognize Derrida’s philosophy, divorced from any sense of domination, to explore the boundaries of writing itself. The above-mentioned innovative little magazines pioneered poetic forms based on non-referentiality, mixing them, altering genre limits and contents related to quotidian experience. All this submitted to a prevalent Derridian dissystemic position in order to move away from simulacrum or exact representation.¹² The literary games in these maga-

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Continuum, 1993) §142.

¹² Nevertheless, I should mention that attention to the materiality of the signifier is complemented by a Marxist perspective in these innovative poets. For instance, Silliman explains his concept of referentiality thus: “The social origin of referentiality to be found in the organization of production in the visibly capitalist form, with its emphasis or measurement, quantifiability, ownership as an individualist (& individualizing) proposition, the division between creation & commodity, and the fetishizing of the latter. The commodity nature of language as its referentialist, with the character of it repressed. The descriptive power of referentiality. The second-order quality of narrative (as temporally organized description —or the form of description most appropriate to the gradual triumph of the structure of technical rationality and the subordination of more and more areas of human life to that structure). Referentiality as fetish.” Ron Silliman, letter to Charles Bernstein, 11.10.76, Mandeville Department of Special Collections, University of California, San Diego. And in *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e* Fredric Jameson published excerpts from his essay, “Jargon,” persisting in his criticism of capitalistic society, calling for new procedures, “its [today’s poetry’s] mission is to over-



zines offer us are full of hidden forces and meta-commentaries between the different voices in his poems. The reconstitution of what is lost into the Derridian *differance* has as its objective the liberation inherent to life-experience, not just literature. In this sense we are reminded of what Julia Kristeva points out regarding Joyce's Modernism in *Finnegans Wake*. He uses language free of "didacticism, rhetoric, dogmatism of any kind".¹³ I say "life" because the term "language" in Bernstein is not limited to the literary world but extends to visual, verbal, gestural and tactile dimensions with a clear projection into the individual's life history or biography. It is evident that this language transcends the mechanical sense of history to lodge itself in a more discursive communication. Although characterized by deliberate opacity, the mode of expression itself makes us more aware of its forms and structures. Kristeva applies the concept of redemption to Joycean opacity, in that the experimental and radical is a source of new meanings, sometimes unexpected. In the innovative poets' case, their obscure language proceeds from the everyday world and their imagination, which is capable of altering conventional reality by using a lexical organization that begs for another reading. Such organization is defined by an opposition to what is ordered from the outside, that is, to deterritorialize signifiers by altering grammar, syntax or spelling to reclaim the idiosyncratic and personal, and stimulate greater attention to language itself and to our awareness of its ideological-political role. For Bernstein, word order and its servility to convention answers to a social order that limits the potential of the human being, whether in the interests of capitalism or of totalitarian communism.

By preferring the suggestions and interpretations generated by formal resources like alliteration, asyndeton, puns, assonance and consonance, parataxis or synesthesia, these innovative poets counter-balance the repressive effect of the macrostructure of language on our experience of the word itself. This is reflected, as illustrative examples, in Clark Coolidge's short sentences of "A Page That Is Nothing but Words Written by Itself", published in *This* 8 (Spring 1977), or in Lyn Hejinian's long poem "Sending" published in *Roof* 5 (1978), where incompleteness is clearly observed, "ans/ ers/ any/ t r/ and/ rest/ us/ aga/ fect/ ase/ me/ o/ icomplete/ We depend on memory in order to read." Non-narrative de-contextualized lines multiply the associations of the many poems published in these magazines. Experimental poems which reappear recollected in books commercially published in later

come the reification of everyday language. ... Over against their sense of the "seriality" of daily life and daily speech, that is, the feeling that the center is always elsewhere, that this language belongs not to us who use it, but to someone else, in distant centers of production of the media, publishing and the like, over against this sense of the draining away to some absent center of the very power to speak, modern poetry reasserts its production of language and reinvents a center. The very difficulty of modern poetry is in direct proportion to the degree of reification of everyday speech... both [poets & theoreticians] violently have recourse to invented speech and private languages in order to reopen a space in which to breathe." Fredric Jameson, "Jargon," *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e* 4 (August 1978): n.p.

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 92.

years, like Charles Bernstein's *Islets/Irritations* or *Controlling Interest*, Ron Silliman's *The Age of Huts*, Barrett Watten's *1-10*, Lyn Hejinian's *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*, or Alan Davies's *Active 24 Hours*, to quote just a few. This experimental writing may be defined as 'syntactic,' understood by some poets in these terms: "The pleasure in hearing syntax is like the pleasure in tasting food... It follows, that is, by *dint* of: a demonstration that we live in a world made content *a posteriori*: an age of huts (*series makes syntax*) not bits."¹⁴ This type of exercise shows their interest in widening the possibilities of poetry, surprising themselves with results that show how the creation of a self contrasts with those of other writers. These poets' poetic and analytic discourse is integrative and unifying despite its often fragmentary character, and involves an interdisciplinary application of aesthetics, ethics, culture and politics, so that there can be sufficient interaction between everyday reality and whatever transcends it.

Many of these poems say something about the clear correspondence between practice and theory. Charles Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption" would be one of the most illustrative cases of this connection where that basic concern of writing is made clear: an area of research with communicative intentions and social power. It is difficult to distinguish if "Artifice of Absorption" is a poem or an essay, formally it would be poetry as it is written in verse, but the rhythm and content are those of a prose essay with footnotes added. It has incidentally been included in his book *A Poetics* published by Harvard University Press. Defining the terms of the title, Bernstein offers us the keys to understanding this text: "'Artifice' is a measure of a poem's/ intractability to being read as the sum of its/ devices and subject matters",¹⁵ "By *absorption* I mean engrossing, engulfing/ completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie,/ attention intensification/ rhapsodic, spellbinding,/ mesmerizing,/ hypnotic,/ total, riveting,/ enthralling: belief, conviction, silence" (*Poetics* 29). He uses numerous examples and literary references throughout the poem/essay that help to perceive the paradoxes of both language and the human condition. The names with the strongest presence are Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Steve McCaffery, Jerome McGann, Emily Dickinson, Bruce Andrews, David Antin, Samuel T. Coleridge, Ezra Pound, Helen Vendler, Donald Wesling, Robert Kelly, Velimir Khlebnikov, Gertrude Stein, Lyn Hejinian, Louis Zukofsky, Clark Coolidge, Ron Silliman, Georges Bataille, Robert Grenier, Nick Piombino, Leslie Scalapino, Samuel Beckett and Merleau-Ponty. Bernstein's quotes and explanations have concrete names and are also a sample of the poetic debate that has led him to varied critical and creative compositions. His main idea is that the anti-absorptive, less transparent techniques he uses are also capable of absorbing the reader, perhaps more powerfully than traditional methods, "non-absorptive means may get the reader/ absorbed into a more ideologized or politicized space" (*Poetics* 53). Fasci-

¹⁴ Charles Bernstein, "Whole to Part: The Ends of the Ideologies of the Long Poem," *Open Letter* [Sixth Series] 2.3 (Summer-Fall 1985): 186.

¹⁵ Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 9.

nated with form and its many shadows, Bernstein exhibits a concept of poetic language as witnessing and questioning individuality, obscuring it for us to judge it, be stimulated by it and use it as a tool in the construction of our selves. Even the form this 89-page-long poem/essay ends in has been altered, if we compare the first version in *Paper Air* with the latest included in his book *A Poetics*. In the first we read a clear exposé of his intentions: “We can try to/ bring our relationship with readers to/ fruition,/ that the site of reading become a fact of value” (65). The end that appears in the latter version differs slightly but with the same interactions in a more poetic tone “Do we cling to/ what we’ve grasped/ too well, or find tunes/ in each new/ departure” (89). In this way, Bernstein joins together poetry and essay, practice and theory, offering the reader a vision of being a carrier of values to be explored in the composition itself.

The implications of this position with regard to language, whether in his poetry or poetics, lead us to consider the role of the self and try to decipher its social articulation and values. From my point of view, this type of literature widens the horizon and leaves behind the romantic self, on not blinkering or narrowing its vision from its own exclusivity outwards, but associating and contrasting it with the Other, the author and the reader intermingle in this aesthetic new order as a privileged mode of discourse since they wander between the subjective and non-subjective (the shared and the transcendent) as the main characteristic feature of what the text itself demands. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, on analyzing modern society in response to poststructuralism in *Sources of the Self*, again speaks up for the values found in literature, ardently defending the idea that language and form cannot be autotelic but rather must mediate between man and perceived reality. His main contribution is the recognition that both art and literature take part in the concept of “epiphany,” which makes them go beyond reality (though still belonging to it) so that they become authentic. His definition: “The epiphany is our achieving contact with something, where this contact either fosters and/or itself constitutes a spiritually significant fulfillment or wholeness” (425). What I mean is that these poets’s approach to language allows this identity of the modern self to debate between the realism of its social position and that which transcends it, by allowing a sense of totality, normally only attainable through art or literature.

The theoretical concerns in these innovative little magazines insisted on poetic modes and discourses promoting an unsettled course. They opened the doors for every reader. History was not seen as a systemic development of immovable facts, but involved in a discursive reconsideration of the past and the present, the self and the world. They favored debates among poets and intellectuals and achieved an international audience. Does this indefatigable privateness still prevail at the beginning of the 21st century? Contemporary American poetry has responded in these last few years by turning back to formalism (let’s say New Formalism or Elliptical poets), but the question of “signification” is still proliferating everywhere. Julia Kristeva has synthesized the contemporary poetic scene into the concept of “signifiante,” in which the symbolic and the semiotic encompass social activity, “[poetical process] falls outside the realm of both the signified and the transcenden-



tal ego and makes of that which we call “literature” other than knowledge: the very place where the social code is destroyed and renewed.”¹⁶

Indeed Douglas Messerli’s editorial statement in the first issue of *La Bas* pointed to his intentions in publishing this little magazine,¹⁷ emphasizing variousness in poetic approaches and an interest in essayist work. This same spirit was revived later in the 1980s and 1990s American little magazines. More than thirty titles have been added following this poetic tendency. In this sense, *To*’s editors are interested in “work that pursues in vital and necessary ways the variousness of our knowing now the multiple languages of our engagement,” going beyond the objectivists’ claim of its title in the 1930s and including poets ranging from Bernstein to Leslie Scalapino or Chris Stroffolino.¹⁸ Mark Wallace in *Situation* is interested in “publishing formally innovative work that explores how writing creates, dismantles, or restructures the possibility of identity. A poetry of situation.”¹⁹ For Barrett Watten, this literary continuation of the aims of the innovative poetry is because this tendency cannot be seen as the handmaid of admiration but “a discursive formation that was made to be broken.”²⁰ Innovative poetry little magazines emerged in the 1970s with new poetic proposals using applying diverse intellectual sources. Their attention to writing has been continually reenacted since then, perhaps due to their capacity to continually reformulate human acts and texts incorporating any relevant intellectual reference.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, “The Speaking Subject and Poetical Language,” *Interdisciplinary Seminar on Identity in Anthropology*, 1975. For Kristeva, the symbolic order fits the signified paying attention to laws, discourses, or conventional judgements in the human beings. The semiotic order corresponds to more primary processes, it is pre-linguistic, intuitive and associated with the earliest learning and apprehension of language in the child.

¹⁷ “Dear Fellow poets: this is the first issue of *La Bas*, a newsletter of experimental poetry and poetics. *La Bas* is sent free to poets who in their poetry have shown an interest in poetry which... is “not poured into moulds,” and whose poetry has reflected a valuing of the poetic process over artifact... *La Bas* prints not only new poetry, but revisions and reactions (responses to poetry, theory, news of interest to poets— whatever). Douglas Messerli, “Editorial Statement,” *La Bas* 1 (1976): n.p.

¹⁸ Seth Frechie and Andrew Mossin, “Editors’ Note,” *To* 1.1 (Summer 1992): n.p.

¹⁹ Mark Wallace, “Editor’s Note,” *Situation* 8 (no date give): n.p.

²⁰ Barrett Watten, “The Secret History of the Equal Sign: $L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e$ between Discourse and Text,” *Poetics Today* 20.4 (Winter 1999): 588.

