

## THE IMPACT OF THE POET-EDITOR: SOME QUESTIONS\*

Manuel Brito  
Universidad de La Laguna

The intellectual routes taken by poets like Charles Bernstein and Barrett Watten are radical in their mistrust of their approaches to humanism, not based on ensuring continuity but rather on testing out and highlighting variety, favoring inclusion instead of discrimination and exclusion. These positions respond to an impulse to show how things and ideas are related. Both poets have been involved in the editorship of innovative poetry since the early 1970s. The first thing everybody learns about American innovative poetry is that some decisive change occurred in this period. Exactly what that change consisted of is more debatable.

I simplify, but I don't think I distort unduly, when I say that both Bernstein and Watten propitiated a change that led to focus on language itself—that is, undoing the correspondence between the signifier and the signified, decentering the self and seeing knowledge as uncertainty, ruining the illusion of stable poetic forms, and continually searching for connections between writing and social issues.

As editors both Bernstein and Watten have invoked a range of cultural forms to continually generate possibilities. They have edited small presses and little magazines that show an emphasis on composition rather than trying to show the coherence of the self or seek valorization for the technique used. Centering on writing as such is sure to receive multiple evaluations, discourse and reaction, and also to be conscious of the author/reader. These recurring issues speak of the enigma of deciphering the public and private aspects of a society which has so rapidly had to assimilate new roles and acceptance of historical and class issues, especially in the last few decades. For each, poetry should act as a vehicle of communication for a new social status, assimilating diverse forms, which exchange values that mass society finds difficult to assume. This is despite this type of avant-garde poetry having been treated as elitist. This open eclectic sense of both form and content is one of its most valuable assets, sustaining the liveliness of its proposals through volumes of essays, lectures, and conferences, and whose importance has grown proportionally to the furious diatribes of official media like *The New Criterion* or *Partisan Review*.

Along with this, we should realize that the primary goal of Language writing is not centered in stylistic renewal as such but in reaching out to new ideological and political meanings. They pointed out that they developed a poetics that insisted



on rejecting “received and beloved notions of voice, self, expression, sincerity and representation” (Bartholomae 42).

If we take Bernstein’s association with the small press Asylum’s Press or the little magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, or Watten’s with This Press and *This* magazine, as objective references due to their appearing as their organ of expression, American innovative poetry as such did not last very long, in fact only up the early 1980s. However, I should say that the literary production of these innovative poets has continued to spread since then, despite the gradual officialization of some of its members by absorption into academic institutions or respectable established journals. In any case, the most stimulating aspect of this collective is that they always expressed their desire to blur the limits of what is literary. And editorship served to reflect upon one of the most outstanding motifs of poetic experience: to experience words as raw material to be deciphered.



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## AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES BERNSTEIN



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Charles Bernstein is a New York City native, who now teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. He writes poetry, and has written about poetics, art, and social issues. Bernstein was the cofounder of the emblematic *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine with Bruce Andrews and has authored over 40 books, most recently *All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems* (2010) from Farrar, Straus and Giroux. I am very happy to have been involved in some of his work through my editorship of his *The Absent Father in Dumbo* (Zasterle, 1991). This led me to understand his poetry as a cultural force, and how he has participated in creating some of the most American avant-garde writing. Over 400 essays and reviews on his work, 500 readings and lectures/talks since 1975, throughout the world, numerous prizes, and his election as Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in 2006, speak of his significant role in contemporary American poetry. His experience as editor has not been limited to print publications—"American Poetry after 1975," *Boundary 2* (2010); *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford University Press, 1998); *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (Roof Books, 1990); or "Language Sampler," *Paris Review* 86 (1982) and "43 Poets (1984)" *Boundary 2* (1986)—since he is the co-founder and co-editor, with Al Filreis, of PENNSound ([writing.upenn.edu/pennsund](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsund)); and editor, and co-founder, with Loss Pequeño Glazier, of the Electronic Poetry Center ([epc.buffalo.edu](http://epc.buffalo.edu)); and has been host and co-producer of *LINEbreak* and *Close Listening*, two radio poetry series. This talk is part of a continuing discussion of the perspectives of editorship in these early decades of the 21st century. I hope it will be helpful to see the new perspectives, not only of creators, but also of means to produce culturally significant work.



MB: *Would you explain your explicit purpose for editorship, if any, and how this tropes some acts of reading experience, discussion, etc.?*

CB: I don't know where editing ends and poetry begins, when teaching stops and essays start, when organizing is set aside and contemplation takes center stage. The relation of one to the other is rhythmic: an oscillating rhythm. Maybe it's a derangement of personality; my inability to draw boundaries or adequately shore my borders against the waves of poetic energy I feel engulfed in and by, and which, by a kind of wind energy, powers what I do. Or maybe it's a kind of textual weaving, warps and wefts, sparks and crests, cunning and conundrum. It's all of a piece in any given day (and the days not given too, the rare days that are earned). It started early for me. I was the editor of my high school newspaper (*Science Survey*) and two literary magazines at college (the official freshman lit mag, *The Harvard Yard Journal* and an entirely ephemeral affair, *Writing*, when I was a senior). A small press editor, first with Asylum's Press in the 1970s, where Susan Bee and I published ourselves, but also Peter Seaton, Ray Di Palma, and Ted Greenwald; then in the later '70s *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* with Bruce Andrews, which also had an out of print book xerox service, which morphed into the Segue Distributing service (with James Sherry), where we did a catalog of a dozen related small presses and magazines. This was all very intensive work, involving endless time in production and mailings. Jump to the present, where I edit, with Eduardo Espina, *S/N: NewWorldPoetics*, a print journal; with Régis Bonvincino, *Sibila*, a web magazine from Sao Paulo (formally print); with Al Filreis and Michael Hennessey, *PennSound*, a digital sound archive, and still the Electronic Poetry Center, with Loss Pequeño Glazier, a web site; as well as my own "web log." And that leaves out quite a bit in between. It seems like much of my day is spent on one or another of these things: bringing disparate stands together, or, better to say, making an imaginary space for those works for which I've developed a great enthusiasm. The key thing with editing is the desire to bring things together, in the same place, that otherwise might not be; to make constellations; but also to archive, collect, display, acknowledge, appreciate. To mix all these metaphors: a way of weaving a context into being. Maybe that context was there and it's just recognizing it, that's probably the most reasonable way to put it, but it can feel like you are making the context by the force of the activity, the editing itself, and that is why it's a kind of poetics; something like making poems via constellation. For me editing always has a fundamentally aesthetic dimension: not doing something already prescribed, but making it—well not "new" necessarily but *making it happen*, making it come into being.

MB: *My first impression is that as editor you have painted a scene that located the poets in and around L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, which, as you mention, also had an out of print book xerox service: poets mobilizing both the concept of the text and social issues, sometimes even before your books came up for discussion... No group of contemporary American poets demands more sustained effort in figuring out*



*what you have done, and why, than the Language poets over the last 40 years. Even though the group designation is controversial, most everyone agrees that many conceptual and formal elements were in common in these poets. How have you assumed the evidence of becoming more credible, marketable?*

CB: *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was an editorial project: willing something into being more than mapping an already existing formation. Something of a fantasy, *bien sur*. That was the fun. In retrospect, it seems more fixed, more of a school or coterie, and it's hard to find a gracious way to get out from under that, like the statue that replaces the damp air of the dawn. Resisting school and coterie (the dog and pony show of the avant-garde) was the inspiration, though I see from a recent memoir by one of our New York company that a fatuous sense of entitled boys club remained a viral presence in our midst, so that brings me back to the less than idealized reality that I helped to form. But that's why for me subsequent editorial projects have been as much a swerve and as a continuation. The hard part is responding to present conditions. As I get older, I find myself stuck in the agonisms of youth. That partly serves me well, especially in terms of a kind of paranoid grounding in the Cold War and resistance to an Official Verse Culture of which I have long been a marquee name (though not top billing!); but it also can make it difficult to see emerging formations, which is why it's best to let the current lead, to go with intuitions of the moment rather than received ideas, even my own!, from the past. And teaching offers the benefit of being around more young people than people of my own generation, younger people for whom what I have long taken for given is not a given. Though I do think I might be better off at the beach in Boca, getting the early bird special as the waiters come and go, talking of Art Basil.

MB: *Editors and publishers cannot afford the increasingly difficulties involved in today's economic crisis. Prestigious small publishers have disappeared or simply been taken over by larger companies. Is this a time for a promotion of new products, a new publishing ethos? How do you see the controversial issue of print culture vs. digital culture?*

CB: Poetry in North America in the postwar years has remained remarkably mobile, entrepreneurial, ingenious. The social networks and publishing methodologies of the alternate, small press, poets are a valuable model, structurally, even apart from the aesthetic achievements of the poems. Radical small press poetry has been astonishingly versatile in sustaining small scale, unpopular/unprofitable cultural products; indeed, thriving in the face of their unpopularity/unprofitability. Talk about *épaté la bourgeoisie*. There has been an exquisite response to available publication technologies from mimeo to xerox to desktop to the web. Unfortunately, due to the fascist dictatorship in Spain, you were not be able to fully participate in this and that took a great toll, as it is not so easy to make up for this lost history. For the last fifteen years, innovative, small press poetry has been moving inexorably to the web, where production and distribution costs are minimal, compared to print and postage; the focus can be on editorial selection and distribution. Much of web space



promotes the absence of selection as the democratic vista, everybody gets their say in unlimited comments' fields. But everyone getting their say on a proscribed set of issues may effectively block dissent against the terms in which the "issues" are posed. And of course that "everyone" is in the comments boxes below the official content. I-pads and I-phones turn the computer revolution toward consumption rather than production. Yet poetry remains an extraordinary area on the web of independent, non-commercial production. And the number of readers/listeners is probably bigger than we ever had with the small press. Millions of mp3 downloads every year on PennSound.

MB: *You have pointed out in your essay, "Provisional Institutions: Alternative Presses and Poetic Innovation," that some difficulties derive from management, and especially the threatening standardization of literature for bulk-buying public.*

CB: Homogenization of product! Even the forms of the unconventional get conventional. Lately I have been talking about the poetics of "pataque(eric)"—the pata- from Alfred Jarry; trying to keep the querulous and query in queer. But the pataqueeronormative is always on the horizon; and I don't mean just in others, I mean primarily in ourselves, in myself. There are so many formulaic products that are so appealing, so seductive. And the unformulaic, non-standard can seem so messy, chaotic, disturbing... Self-indulgent. And sometimes it is. So there is always a risk, and the odds are none too good. But, like the man, says, "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

MB: *Within this context, is it important that poets understand that there is, after all, no money?*

CB: Absolutely. I always say: don't think about how much you will make but just *not to lose too much*. Stemming your losses: that's the key. But there is cultural capital too, which is quite real. And the work you make, if outside of the capital economy, is part of a semiotic economy that is far more substantial and sustaining than those outside it realize; like the grey economy in some ways. Today is the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, where so many mostly young women workers died in a sweatshop where the owners had chained the exits. So I think of James Oppenheim's 1912 poem:

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead  
Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.  
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.  
Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses, too!

MB: *How do you understand editing, as a lonely activity, focused on becoming innovatively competitive? Generally speaking, I should say that my view on your role as editor is that of creating communities... am I too wrong?*

CB: Communities is a vexed term: you can't live with and you can't do without. Literary communities are, at best, "uncommunities" in Jean-Luc Nancy's sense: they are elective affinities. In your neighbourhood or school or pre-



cinct or political alliance, the community is given and present in a way that may underlie the concept of literary community but which is fundamentally different. You don't choose your neighbours, while a literary community, at least one with aesthetic rather than regional or local commitments, is all about choosing. You might come together with like-minded people in a political alliance but, at least in a progressive context, the criteria for the community will be toward collective action or policy goals, such as forming a union or fighting environmental destruction. The beauty, if I can use that word here, of a poetry community is that it can be a constellation of unlikeminded individuals toward an amorphous aesthetic horizon. It is based on taste, on preference, not explicit goals or shared geographic/civic space. But I agree with you that these poetic constellations, so necessarily provisional, are indeed created, are syncretic. Poetry communities are speculative and imaginary; they form a kind of counter-reality to the actual communities and families and alliances that make up the fabric of our everyday life.

MB: *Your own involvement as editor in the Electronic Poetry Center, founded in 1995, has served to see how practitioners have shared their creativity within a transnational and transcultural context. Was this Center modelled for both networked creativity and a forum for research? I mentioned the term "transnational" because you are editing the print journal, S/N: NewWorldPoetics, which is intended to re-open the dialogue between the South and the North. Once again you are focusing on interacting communities...*

CB: Yes; and I'd add also an archival space. So much of the web imagines itself as transactive; at the EPC, as at PennSound, our first attention is to the archive. You are also quite right to note the transnational aspect, though I like to think of it as nonnational more than trans-. My work with Régis Bonvicino in Brazil (as in our magazine, *Sibila*), with Eduardo Espina, of Uruguay, in *S/N: NewWorldPoetics* (the Americas: everything translated from or to Spanish, English, or, to a lesser extent, Portuguese), or with Leevi Lehto in Finland is as much my poetics "neighbourhood" as those in New York and Philadelphia.

MB: *I should also notice that the over 20-year existence of the electronic poetry centers in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and France has provided an allegorical dimension of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, that is, an international apparatus by interpretive circles subsuming your poetry and facilitating the critical gesture of the group. What do you think on this?*

CB: You're right to think of extensions of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, but where that early project is as much subsumed as subsuming. My key points of intersection also include the OEI group in Sweden and long-term connections with poets in Canada, the U.K., Russia, and Portugal (thought my affiliation with Graça Capinha in Coimbra). One of the problems is the tyranny of my own abysmal monolingualism, since so much of what I do takes place in English, so my conversational partners are bilingual while I am not. I see how much this limits what I do. But then English has become very common among poets in Europe. Still, I couldn't have the close rela-



relationship I feel with Arkadii Dragomshchenko if he didn't speak English. (When I said something like this to Marjorie Perloff, she said, then why don't you learn Russian? The truth is probably as simple, and indefensible, as—because I don't have to, so other things take priority.) I should mention also a strong connection over the last decade with China, including forming an association, with Marjorie and Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong for exchange between Chinese and American poetics and scholars, involving conferences, translations, and a stream of visiting scholars at Penn. And then out of the blue this Fall I was given a book of my essays translated in Burmese; totally unexpected. But when I contacted Zeyar Lynn by email, his reply was so totally current with developments in poetry here, well, I could have been writing to you or a friend in Los Angeles. So there is a kind of warped space going on here where poetic affiliations are bringing us together in ways that would have been difficult in the past. These are not networks or communities, exactly, but virtual constellations. We've cast our fate with the stars, as if our quest was for cosmology as much as communion, the cosmococcic as much as the heteroclite.





## AN INTERVIEW WITH BARRETT WATTEN



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Barrett Watten was asked by Peter Davis to select the “most essential” books to him as a poet. His response clarifies the formal and theoretical issues in his thoughtful poetic work. These are the works or categories he found “most formative” for him: modernism, postmodernism, proto-Language writing, Language writing, hybrid texts, New York School, word/image texts, new music/jazz, literary theory, cultural theory, film, and great books.<sup>1</sup> Watten invokes a range of cultural forms that continually generate possibilities, while revealing the poet’s intention to search for the limits of language. His poetry makes the reader to feel the urge to look twice, to ask what kind of translation is going on between the world and its representation. Watten’s published works, *Opera—Works* (1975), *Decay* (1977), *Plasma / Parallels / “X”* (1979), *1-10* (1980), *Complete Thought* (1982), *Progress* (1985), *Conduit* (1988), *Under Erasure* (1991), *Frame 1971-1990* (1997), *Bad History* (1998), *Progress/Under Erasure* (2004), and his essays in *Total Syntax* (1985) have always laid emphasis on the mode of poetic composition that sets off from exploration to appear as testimony to various ideological preoccupations. In the early 1970s he co-edited the little magazine *This* initially with Robert Grenier. Later he edited with Lyn Hejinian the critical journal *Poetics Journal* from 1981 to 1998. He has held teaching positions at San Francisco State University, the University of California, San

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<sup>1</sup> Should you wish to amplify this point, please visit Watten’s site: <[http://www.english.wayne.edu/fac\\_pages/ewatten/posts/post36.html](http://www.english.wayne.edu/fac_pages/ewatten/posts/post36.html)>.



Diego, and is currently professor of English at Wayne State University. His book of essays, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (2003), was awarded the René Wellek Prize in 2004.

MB: *You now live in industrial Detroit, but you were born in Long Beach, California (in 1948). You first studied biochemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, then you became enrolled in the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, and finally got your Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 1995. This combinatory education in science and the humanities makes me ask if poetry was a kind of empirical given for you?*

BW: Do you mean, how did I make contact with poetry, or how did it make contact with me, as something “empirically given,” as existing in the world?

MB: *Yes, how did you come into contact with poets like Robert Grenier, Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, and others...*

BW: In *The Grand Piano*, I describe my early relationship with Robert Grenier, whom I met as an undergraduate student at Berkeley in 1968. This was a turbulent time, which I also wrote about in an essay published in *Critical Inquiry*, “The Turn to Language in the 1960s.” Poetry was a part of a volatile mix of radical politics and cultural change; everything was in process and up for grabs—somewhat like the “La Movida” moment after Franco, though we were responding to the Vietnam War and multiple demands for liberation rather than emerging from a dictatorship. One can imagine that the 60s was a period of great political and even epistemological unsureness—”How do I know what I know” was a question one might ask of everyday life. In addition, I was quite young—I started college at age 16 and graduated at 20, only to face the possibility of the draft and being conscripted to fight in Vietnam. I resisted the draft, through a torturous series of legal maneuvers, which finally resolved after the 1970 draft lottery. At Berkeley, before I met Grenier, poetry was beginning to emerge like a series of signals from the beyond—I am thinking of messages Orfée picks up in Cocteau’s film of that name—that I scarcely knew how to evaluate. Poets like Robert Duncan, W.S. Merwin, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov were reading at Berkeley at the time, and I started to pay attention to them. I took a course on the English lyric, as well, from the well-regarded critic Josephine Miles, who patronized the San Francisco Renaissance, as did the erratic but brilliant Thomas Parkinson, a specialist on the Beats. I started to become interested in the postwar avant-garde (here, however, I might recall that my first “material” connection with poetry was in the 50s, when I heard inklings of the Beat movement from afar, and later connected with *Howl* in high school). But it took the personal connection with Grenier to “make poetry happen” for me. As I put it in *The Grand Piano*, “The transmission of poetry is a passion unlike any other.” Life changed, materially, due to poetry: I left Berkeley for the Iowa Writers Workshop, on the recommendation of Josephine Miles, and found my way back to the Bay Area in the early 70s—when I came into contact, in real time and space, with the group



of poets who would become the Language school, at least in its West Coast emergence.

MB: *Let's talk about your decisive role as editor publishing poetry and essays in This (1971-1982) and Poetics Journal (1982-1998). Were you a visionary diagnosing innovative culture in those twenty-seven years, or was editing an act of essential definition for your poetry?*

BW: You seem to be constructing some kind of allegory of my editorial work on *This* and later *Poetics Journal*, and your use of the term "visionary" is certainly unusual in the context of the Language school, which reacted almost violently against the bardic tradition. But it is worth remembering that there was a significant influence of that tradition—and the entire context of myth—in the late 60s and 70s, understandably a reaction to the constraints of "official verse culture" but also following on many of the more intellectually respectable interests of the New Americans, particularly Charles Olson. Myth, in our work, would morph into the "material signifier," but there was still a possibility of a kind of allegory that would stem from the works we composed. Let's say *This* was entirely concerned with the poetry of the material text or signifier, at least once it consolidated its poetics about number 7 until discontinuance at number 12. There was not one shred of myth or bard in any of that work. However, the interpretive work of *Poetics Journal*, in retrospect, could be seen as a kind of allegorical expansion of the material text—into a wide range of literary and cultural domains. Such a reading would be supported by the influence of deconstruction, on the one hand, and Walter Benjamin, on the other. While there has not yet been a proper account of allegory in the Language school, it might well be profitable.

MB: *Since 2006 you were involved in The Grand Piano serial publication, which has been completed with ten volumes in 2010. I have been following the series and I might say that each volume contributes more privately than ever to the kaleidoscopic alternatives proposed by the authors. In reading the different passages, don't you have the sensation of that period as animated by a universal humanism, especially one centered on community, which is still prevalent today?*

BW: Your question might be broken into two components: what is *The Grand Piano* doing with time; and does its use of narrative and description involve the kind of positive claims to knowledge that one might associate with humanism (rather than some kind of radical scepticism of the postmodern). On the former: I've been thinking—and writing—on the tension between "the present" and historical periodization in our collective autobiography. The present is both the present of writing and the present of the text, which could have been written in the past. In the gap between the two, a space opens up for historical construction—the kind that frames movements of the avant-garde or contextualizes art. As for the latter: I don't see a "humanism" in *The Grand Piano*. There might be a "posthumanism" in distributing the "author function" among the ten of us, but I think that would be overreaching. The most that I would say is that it took "the death of the author"



to imagine a work with ten authors, but they are not identical. Perhaps this movement—from poststructuralism to our present moment—could be seen as historical. As for community, it is always being reinvented—and could fail entirely. I see more “socialism” than “humanism” there—that is, I see community as historically constructed, not assumed.

MB: *To obtain an idea of the complexity and anti-official emergence of the Language poets, it is instructive to review the scenario for the antagonism between the up-to-then dominant poetic current in San Francisco, heralded by Robert Duncan, and the Language poets. You have not talked too much on this historical event. Apparently you irritated Duncan with your defence of the autonomy of language, and the presence of ideological issues in poetry. This same situation has been repeated more recently with Amiri Baraka. How did these stories filter through your life?*

BW: In fact, there is quite a lot out on the Louis Zukofsky fête of 1978, at which Duncan tried to rush me off the stage for my Marxist reading of Zukofsky—which I have never recanted. The resulting collective trauma—as the audience streamed from the room—was widely taken from that moment on as inaugurating a faultline between the speech-based poetics of the New Americans and the writerly interests of the Language school. There are several places where this is discussed in *The Grand Piano*, so I will let that text stand—and I do feel that I am done with processing the implications of the event. As for the debate with Baraka—I would be interested to return to that discussion. What I think both Amiri and I wanted, at a conference on the 60s, was to encourage “speech” as a public act, in the context of poetry but more widely in social terms. So we devised an alternative event, not on the schedule, where we took over a cafeteria at the University of Maine and held an impromptu teach-in. Amiri was pretty amped, and I think in general attempted to overdramatize the faultlines between his position and mine. That’s an understatement. There was something charming and even comedic about the whole thing. I remember Baraka’s repeated compliments on my son, Asa—who had held his own, at age 16, at the conference. We started sharing talk about our kids and their politics. Unfortunately the poetics of public display trumped that level of contact, but it was still worth doing.

MB: *Your detailed presentation of the Language school as a never-ending avant-garde due to the intersubjective discourse and textual materiality propitiated by multiauthorship, and the Listserv ultimately, is fascinatingly presented in “The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Between Discourse and Text.” How is the reader induced to become an observer of this avant-garde in continuous process?*

BW: Somehow through my critical writings “the reader” is shifted from the open position of “the reader makes meaning,” a commonplace and wholly inadequate account of how the “writerly” work is processed by the reader, to something closer to systems theory, where the reader is a second-order observer of the avant-garde as system (articulated in text, discourse, listserv, performance, audience, institutions, and so forth). I would say that simply



to locate such a position for the observer of the avant-garde as a system is a step forward from the merely subjective interpretations of the poststructuralist cliché. However, I would also like to go farther and consider both the social and historical construction and meaning of this position. In writing about the avant-garde in terms of specific institutions (such as the 90s Poetics Listserv, the 00s blogosphere, or the current use of social media), I making a case for a historical as well as formal account of avant-garde agency, which works by enacting networks of production and distribution, not merely radical forms.

MB: *In a quite similar spirit you present American innovative poets as precursors in that same essay, since they elaborated a discourse and wrote in a technique clearly analogous to hypertexts and hypermedia texts. And you turn your attention to some ideological remarks so decisive for these poets regarding alternative book distribution, new formal approaches in poetry, political power... Would you comment more on these issues?*

BW: Do you mean, what is the relation of innovative poetics to digital media? In the early 00s, it seemed that there was a boom in digital poetics; I attended several conferences on e-poetry and started to imagine what my contribution to such a poetics would be. In fact, I published a chapter in Dee Morris's edited volume *New Media Poetics* about that time. It has been a bit troubling to see that the initial boom in digital poetics—which produced a number of stand-out works such as Brian Kim Stefans's *Dream Life of Letters*, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*, or Giselle Beiguelmann's public media works—somewhat bust, much like the boom-and-bust dynamic of digital technology itself. While there was an initial redefinition of the possibilities of poetry in digital media, I don't see that that initiative has continued. On the other hand, I now look to earlier figures like Jackson Mac Low for paradigms of poetics that inform the possibilities of later innovative poetry using digital media. I recently wrote on his sampling procedures in *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, and have used them in the classroom not only to create poems but as a reading strategy, a way of reading across poetic *oeuvres* rather than simply focusing on the interpretation of single poems through close reading.

MB: *Maybe the members of the Language school did not intend to lay down teachings, create followers or be successful in the market. How do you explain that what were marginal texts have become central to modern readers and to university programs. From trendy outsiders to academic insiders... and once margin and center are obliterated may we ask which is the next dream?*

BW: The dream here is one that was perpetuated early on with fantasies of the instant canonization of the Language school; I could assign names to that fantasy, but it was indeed out of touch with reality. We were going to come in a bus and take over the MLA! What has happened has been relatively otherwise. The position of avant-garde poet, or even critic of the avant-garde, has become increasingly tenuous with the downsizing and corporatization of the academy. The institutional focus of poetics has shifted consid-



erably from the MLA to the AWP, as the generation of “post-avant” poets who have entered the academy are teaching creative writing, not literature or poetics (as I and a very few others are doing). There are, in fact, a handful of avant-garde poet/critics who have made their way into the university system, and I happen to be one of them. “Academic insiders” is both a wild projection of power—which I am sure is profitable to the few who want to maintain that illusion—and actually denigrating to the amount of sheer labor that is necessary to obtain a tenure-track teaching position in a field other than creative writing. This is a fantasy that needs to end.

MB: *Why do you think that contemporary tendencies in the U.S. like the School of Quietude and Post-Language poetry have not been able to replace the Language poets? Did they fail to provide a new substantial orientation or did the Language poets really reach the limits of poetry procedures?*

BW: Are you referring here to Ron Silliman’s “School of Quietude” and “post-Avant,” which he makes about as much use of as humanly possible, for such portmanteau terms, on his blog?

MB: *Yes, that’s right...*

BW: If there is any sense among younger writers that Silliman is holding them back, it might be in the deployment of such categories, into which anything might be placed, depending on whether you like it or not. In fact, the real meaning of “School of Quietude” is “moderately boring,” and for “post-Avant,” “moderately interesting”—neither of which says anything except the subjective vagaries of taste. On the other hand, Ron was very attentive to and enthusiastic about the emergence of Flarf and conceptual writing as new schools. Finally, the idea that Language poets have “reached the limits of poetry procedure” is equal to a death sentence, even for Language poets. Nonsense—this is formalism with a vengeance.

MB: *How is your rewriting of modernism an emancipatory act; and how does such a rewriting stake out a discrepant approach that differs from others of your generation (let’s say the East Coast Language writers, with their closer ties to New York modernism)?*

BW: I see my rewriting of modernism, first, as a social and historical act, but it interests me that you see its conceptual nature as part of what is emancipatory about it. Let’s imagine this is something that Jackson Mac Low did when he rewrote Pound’s Cantos in *Words ’n Ends for Ez*. I endorse that move, and think an aspect of my own work, and its concern with rewriting or overwriting, shares a common ground with Mac Low, coming from the conceptual moment of the 60s. But there is also a more aesthetic or formal reading of such a move, which I would associate with the formalism of some of the East Coast Language writers. In such a reading, Mac Low’s formal invention is merely a play on tradition. There is something conservative, rather than emancipatory, about such an interpretation of radical formal procedures as leading back, inevitably, to the tradition that gave them birth. Certain politically conservative modernist critics have made much use of this misreading.



MB: *Your intention for witnessing and anonymity is another big issue. You mention in Total Syntax that style includes ideology, is there a provocative effort to read your materialist work qua theoretical impulses?*

BW: In my argument in *Total Syntax*, the style of Charles Olson's reading at Berkeley—which exceeded the style of his poetry in the public performance of it—tells us something important about the nature of the “poetic function,” after Roman Jakobson. If we bring the “poetic function” in line with “ideology,” after Marxist critics like Terry Eagleton, we see that it is both determined by unresolved contradictions *and* a moment of ideology critique in itself. I believe poetics, then, solves a major question of ideology critique that arose in the 80s—how to be outside false consciousness, if all one can know within capitalism is precisely limited to false consciousness—through the foregrounding of signification. “The signifier stands in a certain relief”—this is the basis for the belief that poetry enacts an effective ideology critique. The denial of this effect, as well, might be the strong claim of cultural critics who think poetry *lacks* such effective agency.

MB: *In your poetry there has been an overload of information, taking for granted the discontinuity of the text to the past. However, this constructivist approach is historically contextualized since you take up specific historical moments, through memory or travel, such as your own education, your view on East Berlin, your California experience, the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the 1994 Los Angeles riots or O.J. Simpson on TV, as you develop in Bad History. Once I have been re-reading your work your interpretation of literary and other cultural artifacts seems closer to a project based on the heterogeneous ruins of history, downsizing grammar and syntax, emphasizing the reality of the present instant, “an act in instantaneous history” (Conduit 68). Has this instant, this Benjaminian “jetzt” that erupts and disrupts, been approaching to silence in these later years?*

BW: I have been writing in multiple genres—poetry, poetics, blog posts (which you cite on my travels to Berlin and the former East Germany), criticism, autobiography. In the last decade, *The Grand Piano* was my most engrossing creative project, and it had to be produced in that time frame due to the necessity of coordinating the efforts of the ten authors involved. It took quite a bit longer to produce than I imagined—twelve years of reflection and writing, in fact, compared to the six formative years it refers to, 1975-80). While I am interested in the attenuation of the historical to a null point in the present, and in the historical past (I am thinking of Stunde Null in Germany, the “zero hour” after the war), that would only be one concern among many. The title of my current MS of shorter poems, which I plan to complete this year, is *Politics of Nothing*; it refers to the Bush Era, 2001-8, during which time *nothing* was indeed the political agenda, and we wrote *The Grand Piano*. A more elaborate, and partly completed, poetic project is titled *Zone*; it works with the overwriting of history (in the form of an overwriting of William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*). I hope this gives a good answer to a question that is rather broad in its implications.



MB: *Windows, frames, squares, paralleles, appear and reappear in your work. However, these apparently allegorical and graphic codes of perception impose the task of non-immediate viewing. This motivates playful complication and demands to see and to discover. I wonder if this implies an act of construction of the unbearable reality, or confidence generated by this sort of friction between worlds...*

BW: What I think you are getting at here is something like this: in my work, there are many instances where “frames” for viewing, interpretation, cognition, representation are presented, but they are detached from what they see, interpret, understand, or represent. It is as if the frames themselves (windows, squares, parallel lines, and so forth) have a reality of their own. This could imply two things: that these figures for framing enable the viewing, interpreting, cognizing, representing of something; or that they obscure or prevent it, by their own material or phenomenological existence. Whence came this emphasis on frames? Do they derive from the conflict between systems, discourses, regimes of knowing? Or are they original elements of cognition, components of an abstract capacity of perceive and know? Do we side with Kant on the a priori nature of categories, or do we see a material history that produced them? I think poetry, finally, sides with the material and historical, even as these may be elucidated by the a priori. These frames, then, were generated by the acts they represent, but also by the conflicts and differences between them. They are differential.

MB: *There is always something happening in your work, with every new reading the words change, the structure simply becomes a series of signs, another identity emerges... I mean that both temporalization and spatialization enact your use of language as a system of Derridian différance. Do you have some idea or topography when you begin to write a particular poem, or the original intentional consciousness is missing from everything?*

BW: Deconstruction was an initially brilliant, then somewhat obstructive, and finally historically specific philosophical project that one can consult with profit (but without buying into it as a discourse of “mastery” by any means). As such, it partakes of the same historical and spatial effects that you see in my poetry, and that would obtain in any work that challenges the reader in the act of interpretation. I am interested in a poetry that can be continually reread, yes—that is how I read *Progress* or *Under Erasure*, as different every time—because time and space are factored into the poems as differentials. There is no final horizon, but there is an obligation to act decisively after the confrontation with interpretation, rather than merely remain in an aesthetic state of free play. I want the challenge of my work to be decisive.

MB: *After four decades in which your work has clamoured to assert its meaningfulness, are you still directing matters from off stage?*

BW: Am I the dark genius of the Language school? If so, thank you. I am interested in the workings of negativity in its effects. But can that account for everything? I doubt it.

