

"Isn't the avant garde always pedagogical": Experimental Poetics and / as Pedagogy

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This essay has its roots in my thinking about a line in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*: "Isn't the avant garde always pedagogical[?]" (92). "Pedagogical" struck me as a term with particular connotations in that sentence, connotations different from those of a possible alternative like "didactic." Avant-gardes have always been didactic, in their production of manifestoes, their strong element of social critique, and their claims on the art of the future. But to introduce the connotations of professionalization that come with the word "pedagogy" is to introduce a shift in the avant-garde's relation to the idea of teaching and its institutions. I can demonstrate this shift briefly if I begin with an avant-garde poet who was both didact and self-described pedagogue, Charles Olson.

When Olson addressed his broadside letter-poem "Letter for Melville 1951" to his friend and Melville's granddaughter Eleanor Metcalf, and poured vitriol upon the Melville Society and its upcoming "One Hundredth Birthday Party" for *Moby-Dick*, he could comfortably situate himself outside the academic circles on which he was commenting. A coterie poet himself, Olson nonetheless offers a bluntly sarcastic critique of coterie academic politics: "who but us, who but us has had the niceness to organize ourselves in his name, who, outside us,...who is, but us, provided with dormitories and catering services?" (234) None of this is very subtle—broadside never are—especially when one factors in the distasteful queer-bashing that also runs through the poem and the possible elements of professional jealousy in a poet who, a Melvillean himself, had turned his back on that academic world. But a poem like "Letter for Melville 1951" is hard to imagine today, when avant-garde poetics is so complexly implicated in the pedagogical institution that it still frequently critiques. To think of the avant-garde as "pedagogical," as Hejinian does, marks a significant shift in the closeness of the avant-garde's relation to the academy.

Within recent avant-garde poetics two contrary responses to the problem of poetry and pedagogical institutions can be found in the

exchange between Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman coming out of a 1997 symposium on Perelman's critical book *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*. Perelman's subsequent "Counter-Response" to critiques of his book devotes considerable time to defending his attention to academia. As he rightly points out, "many people who attended the original panel had their desire for poetry at least partially piqued in school" (38)—which paradoxically can be one place that one learns about the attractions of the non-school venues for poetry that Perelman also values.¹ Throughout Perelman's remarks, "pedagogy" is one crucial source of interest in poetry. After dismissing the notion that "our passion for poetry" is "created by purely visual epiphany in a kind of unpedagogic, virgin birth," he goes on to assert that "pedagogy, repetition and circulation are very widespread structuring conditions against which to act—both as writer and as imaginer of receivers" (40). The challenge for experimental poetics, that is, is how to engage, rather than turn one's back on, these conditions.

Around the issue of pedagogy, Perelman's own engagement is a complex and ambivalent one, reflected in how he talks about the knowledge that reading poetry requires. In glossing his poem "The Marginalization of Poetry," which early on cites Jack Spicer's well-known lines "No one listens to poetry," Perelman observes that he honors Spicer's coterie autonomy "by giving no references, saying you have to already know about him" (38). This moment anticipates a similar one in a recent Perelman talk on the teaching of experimental writing where he writes "It is a given in [Ted] Berrigan's work that John Ashbery and, even more, Frank O'Hara, are unquestionable masters. How is this information a given? You have to know. How do you know?...How does one teach that?" ("Just Like Me") I would add that you also "have to know" the texture and context of Berrigan's allusions to the New York scene—Norton explanatory notes wouldn't do it. How does one teach what one knows when it is more than can be taught? From one angle, this claim to special knowledge is a form of special pleading that comfortably preserves the teacher-student hierarchy or the coterie poet's status. But for Perelman's purposes, his comment on Spicer makes for an effectively self-justifying point, since most readers will "know about him" (or can get to know about him) from school. So, rather wonderfully, you "know about"

Spicer and Berrigan from school, at the same time as what is to be known about them is ultimately unteachable.

66 Much of Perelman's recent work in poetry splices genres, discourses, and tones in just the manner of "The Marginalization of Poetry"—the conference paper-essay-poem and teacherly text that provides the title of his academic book on the avant-garde poetics of Language writing. The essay-poem-chapter "An Alphabet of Literary History" in that book is indirectly a teaching poem about Language writing that pursues its pedagogical purpose by locating the work in a tangled and ambivalent genealogy, one that dangles both a stultifying "seduction" and bracing "instruction" as possibilities: in Perelman's adaptation of Horace's *dulce et utile*, "a tradition of seduction and instruction" (*Marginalization* 147). He begins this teaching in section A of the poem by mimicking Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, an earlier avant-garde manifesto aimed at teaching its readers how to read it. Keats' most famous pedagogical moment is also parodied: "For the record: Speech is writinG, / writinG speech. That is the lesson the body waits to hear..." (149). Wordsworth and Keats here are really "Wordsworth" and "Keats"; that is, their names belong in quotation marks when they are present not so much as poets as signifiers in a historical narrative, brief stopovers in Week 8 of British Lit 11, Dryden to the Present.

As a ventriloquized Roland Barthes says in Perelman's next chapter, "I like those old tricks. There would hardly be any literature without them. And not much writing, either, to tell the truth. Isn't that a distinction you're trying to keep in focus?" (160) Perelman's Barthes goes on to lament his own status as an object of pedagogy: my writing, he says, "gained me a big audience, but so many of them were students, finally" (162). If Barthes' tone is deprecating, students, Perelman wants to suggest, are nevertheless where the "big audience" lies. At the same time, however, Barthes voices Perelman's conflicts about his own enterprise. Returning to the entanglements of genealogy (which the classroom functions to comb out), Barthes concludes the book by mocking part of its pedagogic project: "You Americans are obsessed with self-fashioned lineage, aren't you?" (165)—this at the end of a chapter that has begun with a Frank O'Hara epigraph, "And don't worry about your lineage, poetic or natural" (156).

Let me return now to the *Marginalization of Poetry* panel and the exchange between Perelman and Silliman that I mentioned above. On the evening of the panel, Perelman read his poem “Confession”—a significant choice both for its status as a companion piece to the poem “Marginalization” and for its cheery embrace of the normative: “This writing seems pretty normal: // complete sentences; semicolons; yada yada. I / seem to have lost my avant-garde / card in the laundry. They say / that’s typical. Well, you’ll just have to use your judgment, earthlings! Judgment, / that’s your job! Back to work!” (*Future of Memory* 11). Even with their move into verbal slapstick, these lines get to a significant difference between Perelman and Silliman on the question of judgment. For it is precisely what Silliman sees as the twin problematics of “aboutness” and value judgments in *The Marginalization of Poetry* that he queries. For Silliman, the constraints of a pedagogical situation that seems to require the judgments on which canonical exclusions and inclusions rest invalidate that pedagogy by definition. In such a context, institutional legitimation risks taking precedent over avant-gardist self-legitimation. Thus, Silliman argues, “the very best poet-teachers are all put into an untenable position not radically different *in its structure* from that confronted by Oscar Schindler—the most they can hope to do is to help a few bright students escape and to minimize the damage” (“Marginalization” 12). Most participants in the academic process actively obstruct the reading of poetry, and “there is no way out of this double-bind from within the confines of the English Department” (13).

These remarks are anticipated in Silliman’s 1987 book *Lit*, based on his own teaching experiences² and published at a time when he was arguing elsewhere that “academic colonization is contemporary poetry’s fundamental social problem” (“Poets” 124) but a time also when few Language writers were formally affiliated with the academy. Not so much “pedagogy” in general, more the question of who enjoys the power to practice it, is one of the many subjects woven through *Lit*—Silliman’s shorthand for institutionalized “Literature.” Silliman directs pointed satire at the institutional structures that supposedly sustain the teaching of “lit”—“Balinese / term for monkey, Associate Monkey or / Full” (18)—and delights in the despoliation of the poetic products associated

with those structures: “watch the orange cat spray / all over the University of Pittsburgh Press, dramatic / monologue of a false self” (19). More sober and sobering than these playful moments in *Lit*, however, are those that address “tenure”—Silliman’s trope for the academy and its power structures. “Tenure,” that is, becomes a way of talking succinctly about exclusion and inclusion, power and its lack. He witnesses “profuse apologies denying tenure,” among “administrators [who] *want* to act guilty” (21, 29). It’s hardly news to be reminded of the twin roles of allegedly capricious judgment and fear in the tenure process: “Elastic / aesthetic governs tenure, / fear,” Silliman observes at one point, and then later, in a blunt off-rhyme, “tenure / is terror” (45, 52). Perhaps more chastening is the reminder of the ways in which that process can be seen to mirror larger political processes: “Aid / to the so-called developing nations is intended to reinforce existing power relations within them. Of 13 tenured professors / twelve are white men” (43). If the radical poet-teacher is going to propose such analogies, no wonder “the grammarian thinks to rid / the Department / of poets teaching comp” (53).

Lit, then, testifies to the political and psychological costs of maintaining current structures of pedagogy—not original observations, we might say, but registered with succinctness and wit and hardly common in the work of more middle-of-the-road contemporary poets, who largely repress their institutional lives. But what about poetry in *Lit*? It is suppressed and disabled, rather than advanced and enabled, by pedagogy. “Who remembers the linguist of the Hotel Wentley” (64), Jack Spicer?³ Not those “white and aimless, cum laude” graduates who have a degree but no education, who “have learned which books to purchase, but not which ones to read.” From failed pedagogy to canonical exclusion—the path is clear. “The road to Iowa City” and its writing program—too glib a target now, but perhaps less so at the time of Silliman’s writing—“is paved with good intentions” but not good poetry or teaching practices. Its “white and aimless” MFA students are locked into limited notions of genre and presentation (“perfect binding,” “ragged right” margins); into conventions of publication that promote the power hierarchy of submission over the communal exchange of solicitation; and into predictable notions of poetic careerism reflected in their efforts to appear in *Poetry* magazine:

“habit sought Rago’s white horse, a site for soaring lyric lies” (64). That habit is anachronistic, among other things, since Henry Rago had not edited *Poetry* since 1969.

A few pages later, as he closes the book, Silliman appears to move his target from Iowa to Harvard (the site invoked by the phrase “the car in the yard”), although in fact it is UC Berkeley that he has in mind.⁴ There, in the neighborhood of one developing center of Language writing, “the ward healers of tenure bicker” over whether to keep the Spenserian or the Chaucerian but remain incompetent to deal with the material textuality at the center of much avant-garde writing: “not one literate among them in the face of a single syllable sounded, soft and simple, ample enough to sample the whole of the world’s thought rounded in the mouth” (68). The “materiality” of the passage I quoted, of course, consists of a concentration of sonic devices that Spenser or Chaucer would recognize easily. From behind their pedagogical blinkers, however, the “healers of tenure” cannot see or hear this as writing—merely as “not poetry.” An impoverished pedagogy merely sustains that trivial enterprise, Lit: “Curriculum demands division into genre and the vision is gone of a possible writing” (68), a statement that itself troubles “division into genre” by sounding like an essay in *College English* instead of “lit.” Within a single sentence, Silliman has moved between the extremes of poetic sonorousness and expository prose, enacting formally (or teaching his readers) what might be meant by “a possible writing.” But in the words of his final paragraph, the current balance of power leaves “lit up, writing down,” within the “discipline limits” that an institutionalized pedagogy of poetry demands. Silliman projects little real hope that these “parrots of the past” will respond to his variation on Marx’s famous call: “parrots of the past unite, for what have you to lose but that through which you live” (69)—your intellectual chains.

In Silliman’s *Lit*, the pedagogical imperative to “make it known is such a small demand” when “knowledge cannot be taught” (68). Despite the differences reflected in their 1997 exchange, this view of knowledge seems not too far from Perelman preserving Spicer’s and Berrigan’s coterie status so that you just have to know. So Perelman’s question remains: how do you know? If there’s a poetic knowing (what Hejinian calls in *My Life* “the language of inquiry,

pedagogy of poetry" [114]) and a knowing about poetry that cannot be taught, perhaps avant-garde writing can at least formally instantiate that knowing in a way that reflects simultaneously on what and how poetry might teach, and on itself as a text likely to circulate in a pedagogical context. Meanwhile, beyond the apparent overlap on the issue of "knowing," Perelman still believes that effective teaching of, and from the position of, experimental poetics can be accomplished in the university setting. Silliman does not. This conflict has long been an exemplary one for avant-garde poetics in its relation to pedagogical institutions, and it remains so today.

NOTES

1. To clarify the phrase "the original panel": while Perelman participated in "the original [1997] panel" on his *Marginalization of Poetry*, "Counter-Response" was written after the fact but published along with the talks from the panel.
2. Specifically, at San Francisco State University and then UC San Diego in 1981-82.
3. In response to my original reading of the "linguist" as John Wieners, Silliman has said that he had Jack Spicer in mind (e-mail to the author, 5/9/00). Although Wieners is the author of *The Hotel Wentley Poems*, Spicer lived in the hotel (at the corner of Polk and Sutter in San Francisco) for a considerably longer time span.
4. Silliman has said that the academy of *Lit* is somewhat of a composite one, in which "I use a lot of different schools not quite interchangeably": hence the conflation of the allusion to Harvard and the events at Berkeley, where the debate over the competing virtues of the Chaucer and the Spenser scholars occurred. The 12:1 male:female faculty ratio obtained at San Francisco State University in the early 1980s, with Kathleen Fraser the one female. E-mail to the author, 5/9/00.