

Why Don't Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?

I've been asked this questions twice, in slightly differing forms. In conversation I was asked, "Why don't more women do language-oriented writing?" I answered that women need to describe the conditions of their lives. This entails representation. Often they feel too much anger to participate in the analytical tendencies of modernist or "post-modernist" art. This was an obvious answer. The more I thought about it the less it explained anything important. Most male writers aren't language-centered either. Why don't more men do language-oriented writing?

Several months later, by mail, I was asked to write an article explaining why women *don't* produce language-oriented works. The letter suggested I might elaborate on the answer I'd given before. But it wasn't the same question! Some female writers do focus on language. Was I being asked to justify their exclusion from consideration? Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Susan Howe, Hannah Weiner, Carla Harryman, Lynne Dreyer, Joanne Kyger, Anne Waldman and Maureen Owen seem, to one degree or another, language-oriented. Of course, that's a tricky term. If it's taken to mean total non-reference, these women don't fit. Neither, however, do Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, Ted Greenwald, Charles Bernstein or Bruce Andrews.

To believe non-referentiality is possible is to believe language can be divorced from thought, words from their histories. If the idea of non-reference is discarded, what does language-oriented mean? Does it simply designate writing which is language-conscious (self-aware)? If so, the term could be applied to a very large number of writers. Anyone who sees the way signifier intertwines with signified will pay close heed to the structures of language.

Susan Howe calls our attention to the effect of linguistic structure on belief when she writes

as wise as an (earwig, owl, eel).

as sober as a (knight, minstrel, judge).

as crafty as a (fox, cuckoo, kitten).
as smooth as (sandpaper, velvet, wood).
as slippery as an (accident, eel, engine)
as straight as an (angle, angel, arrow).

(*The Western Borders*, Tuumba Press)

And a minstrel may very well be more clear-headed than a judge. It's important to note this.

Howe's passage amounts to a polemic against the influence of habit. This specific concern is common in language-oriented work. When Carla Harryman writes,

Although temperature flags on its own, the past dissolves.
I wanted to settle down to a nap. The sand settles at the
bottom of the ocean. I sink to the top of the water.

("Sites," *Hills* magazine #4)

the word "although" prepares the reader for a contradiction between the clauses in the first sentence. When no contradiction follows, the reader's attention increases. The concept of contradiction is rooted in the laws of logic, cause and effect. Harryman wants to throw these "laws" into question. There is the jar of discontinuity between the clauses, sentences and paragraphs in this work. The lines I quoted do not follow logically, but they are united *linguistically* by the near-synonymous verbs. Harryman puts content at odds with syntactical (or sometimes narrative) structures in order to make these structures stand out, enter our consciousness.

Although Lyn Hejinian uses syntax in a fairly conventional way, her work is less referential than that of most of the writers I've mentioned. Of course, her writing does "say things" about the world, but the significance of these statements is not what interests her. In her book, *A Mask of Motion*, she rings the changes on a number of phrases and words. Each usage of a word becomes a mask for its other uses. Context, placement, are of prime importance. When she writes "of the yapping distances, the extended return," one hears the dog she introduced five pages earlier.

Howe, Harryman, and Hejinian are very different, yet the term language-oriented might be applied to any of them. I use that term but I'm suspicious of it, finally, because it seems to imply division between language and experience, thought and feeling, inner and outer. The work I like best sees itself and sees the world. It is ambi-centric, if you will. The writers I like are surprising, revelatory. They bring the underlying structures of language/thought into consciousness. They spurn the facile. Though they generally don't believe in the Truth, they are scrupulously honest about the way word relates to word, sentence to sentence. Some of them are men and some are women.