

'Language' School in American Poetry: Intellectual History and Alternative Publishing

У статті простежується історія формування "мовної школи" поезії США з точки зору її видавничого та інтелектуально-філософського контексту. Авторка вказує, що колективні проекти, які стали одним із чинників формування групи, були частиною загальної тенденції до створення альтернативних видавничих платформ у США в 1950–1970-х рр. XX ст. Окремо розглядається журнал "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" – важливе видання в історії напрямку, що означилося своєрідною конвергенцією художньо-літературних практик та філософсько-теоретичної рефлексії. Всупереч поширеній у літературній критиці ідеї про те, що поезія "мовної" школи сформувалась під впливом постструктуралізму, в статті доводиться, що і "мовне" письмо, і французька постструктуралістська теорія переживають свою появу в американській інтелектуальній культурі приблизно в один і той самий час, а отже, йдеться скоріше про продуктивний збіг окремих аспектів "мовної" поезії з ідеями постструктуралізму.

Ключові слова: "мовна школа", видавничі проекти, журнал "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E", конвергенція літератури та теорії, постструктуралізм.

В статье рассматривается история формирования "языковой школы" поэзии США с точки зрения ее издательского и интеллектуально-философского контекста. Автор указывает, что коллективные проекты, которые стали одним из факторов формирования группы, были частью общей тенденции для создания альтернативных издательских платформ в США в 1950–1970 гг. XX в. Отдельно рассматривается журнал "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" – важное издание в истории направления, что было своеобразной конвергенцией художественно-литературных практик и философско-теоретической рефлексии. На противовес распространенной в литературной критике идеи о том, что поэзия "языковой школы" сформировалась под влиянием постструктурализма, в статье доказывается, что и "языковое" письмо, и французская постструктуралистская теория переживают свое появление в американской интеллектуальной культуре приблизительно в одно и то же время, и следовательно, речь идет быстрее о продуктивном стечении отдельных аспектов "языковой" поэзии с идеями постструктурализма.

Ключевые слова: "языковая школа", издательские проекты, журнал "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E", конвергенция литературы и теории, постструктурализм.

The article traces the formation of Language school of poetry in the US from the standpoint of its publishing and intellectual context. The author points out that the collective projects which were a factor in the group formation were part of a larger tendency to create alternative publishing platforms in the US in 1950–60s. The article offers a case study of the "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" journal which was marked by a convergence of literary and philosophical practice. It is proved that Language writing and poststructuralist theory emerge in the American intellectual context approximately at the same time, which allows to speak of a productive coincidence of aspects of Language poetry with poststructuralist ideas.

Key words: Language school, publishing projects, "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" journal, convergence of literature and theory, poststructuralism.

'Language poets', 'Language school', 'Language movement' is a collective term that has existed since the late 1970s and signifies a rather numerous and motley group of U.S. authors, some of whom originally coalesced around periodicals such as "This" (California, 1971–1982) and "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" (New York, 1978–1981). The latter journal gave its name to the whole group; the poets who subsequently came to be associated with the 'Language' movement include Rae Armantrout, Rosmarie Waldrop, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten, Bruce Andrews, Carla Harryman, Clark Coolidge, Susan Howe, Ron Silliman, Bernadette Mayer, Michael Palmer, Bob Perelman, Joan Retallack, Leslie Scalapino and others. Despite tangible differences between the respective poetic projects of each author (which literary critics often point out), the collective dimension of their activity still has a certain significance given the political aspect of 'Language' as well as its relation to the literary (neo-) avant-garde. Thus, a proper study of the multiple and various poetics which constitute this literary phenomenon is hardly possible without providing an account of the 'Language' community and its formation. There are a number of studies which offer an insight into the history of the movement and its collective nature; however, practically none of them address the alliance between philosophical theory and experimental literature which forms in the American publishing in the 1960s – 1970s and can serve as an important context for a consideration of 'Language' poetics as well as theoretical writings by authors of the group. This article is divided into two

subsections: the first gives an overview of the movement's history and its collective publishing projects, while the second offers a case study of the "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" journal in order to illustrate its possible connection to small periodicals of philosophical theory that emerged in the American academia with the rise of poststructuralism. It is subsequently argued that initial poststructuralist influence on these authors could not have been significant (as some critics have claimed) since 'Language' appeared on the American cultural scene almost concurrently with the publication of major poststructuralist works.

The rise of 'Language' group to literary prominence reflects tendencies in the American literary and intellectual history in the 2nd half of the XX century. One of the factors that influenced the formation of the movement was the state of American publishing during the 1950s – 1970s. During this period, a number of small presses as well as independent journals were emerging which was provoked in part by the growing institutionalization of literature. The poets who came to be associated with the 'Language' school did not belong, to borrow Charles Bernstein's expression, to the "Official Verse Culture" [5, p. 249] and thus needed alternative platforms for publication. One of such platforms initially was the issue titled "From THE DWELLING PLACE" (1975) of the "Alcheringa" journal, edited by Ron Silliman and containing texts by nine poets of the group, including Clark Coolidge, Barrett Watten and Bruce Andrews. It is the publication of this issue that is sometimes invoked as the starting point in group's creation [8]. Other periodicals, among which the abovementioned "This" and "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" as well as the newsletter "Tottel's" also played a significant role in making 'Language' writing known to the reader as well as the formation of a literary community with its own program, although the tenets of this program – among which the critics often underscore the attention to referentiality and ideological nature of language [7; 8] – were not shared by all authors. The journal "ROOF" (1976–1979, New York) gave rise to the "ROOF Books" press, which starting from the 1970s published a number of books by authors of the group. Among other projects, it is very worth mentioning the Tuumba Press (founded in 1976 and run by the 'Language' poet Lyn Hejinian till 1984) which in the chapbook format printed collections by group's poets, totaling around 50 books within the timespan of its existence.

Besides that, in the history of the 'Language' group there were a number of other collaborations which, in spite of all critical reservations, demonstrate the importance of its collective dimension. In 1988, the New School for Social Research in New York hosted a series of discussions

on the politics of literature (curated by the poet Charles Bernstein), the proceedings of which were published as the anthology titled "Politics of Poetic Form" (1990, ROOF Books) – arguably the most programmatic publication of the group. The essays of the anthology articulated a number of important tenets which were theoretically quite ahead of the existing conceptions of the political/aesthetic relation as well as dismissed the politically engaged writing of its time – "conventionally progressive writing", to quote Bruce Andrews [1, p. 23]. Some of these tenets, including the positing of an inherent and dynamic connection between art and politics, or of the inevitable contingency of any text's political effect – anticipate the later philosophical conceptualizations of a political aesthetic, in particular Jacques Ranciere's theory of 'dissensus' [10]. Thus, the publication of this anthology, along with the "Politics of Referent" issue of the Open Letter journal (1977), is likely the main reason why 'Language' as a group "has been repeatedly characterized in terms of its political contours" [3; 7] in literary criticism.

As has already been pointed out, the period of 1960s–1970s in the US was marked by a proliferation of independent periodicals, including academic journals in the humanities, which was as much due to lack of publishing platforms as also to the need of facilitating intellectual dialogue with European countries through translation and publication of translated works. Among these journals there were two key categories: 1) those that published literary works, most often – experimental poetry (see, for instance, journals mentioned above); 2) journal focused on the 'continental' philosophical and political theory which acquired publicity in the US already at the time of Second World War after its important exponents, among whom members of the Frankfurt School, had immigrated to the US. The 1970s in America were marked by an unprecedented increase of interest in the continental philosophy (it should be noted that it is the analytic and not the continental tradition that is dominant in the US academy up to this day). Most of this interest was focused on the French poststructuralism which had emerged in the 1960s. As the scholar François Cusset notes, this spark of interest was largely made possible by the academic journals which published fragments from words by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and other philosophers. Such journals were often primitive in form – sometimes a stack of copies bound together – but served as an important and almost exclusive source of 'French theory' at the moment [6, p. 60]. According to Cusset, publications of this kind used as their model the already existing form of the literary journal published by various poetic groups, including 'Language' poets [6, p. 61]. Although the scholar recognizes a certain

affinity between the respective conditions of literary and theoretical texts' publication and dissemination, it follows from the logic of his statement that literature, on the one hand, and social and philosophical theory, on the other, belonged to completely different realms. The coincidences of the publication form, as one might infer, were rather due to a similar relation of (initially marginal) communities behind the periodicals to the mainstream – literary or academic, in each case.

Contrary to this thesis, the peculiarities of "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E", which, as was said above, became a factor in the formation of the 'Language' school, indicate a different phenomenon, which is essential to the understanding of the whole project. "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" – a literary journal which was published by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews in late 1970s - early 1980s – within the few years of its existence became an important vehicle for the emergence of new names in American poetry from different parts of the country, both East and West coast; a number of poems by 'Language' authors which have now already entered the 'canon' of American experimental writing were first printed in this journal. At the same time, alongside with its literary focus, the periodical had a distinct theoretical dimension: thus, for instance, one of the issues (published in April 1978) opened with a fragment from Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* in English translation [4, p.1–2]. A number of issues included, among other texts, essays and articles from different fields – literary studies, political and social philosophy etc. – often located at their cross-section, mostly written by the group's members. The title of the journal, despite its conspicuously avant-gardist realization, pointed primarily to the authors' academic interests – a significant number of the texts centered on the problems of language and writing (in particular, by such 'Language' poet-critics as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian and others who are now based in literature and creative writing departments of various U.S. universities). Also, the journal contained texts of social and political critique, e.g. essays on Marx (Ron Silliman), socialist politics (Jackson Mac Low) or political praxis (Bruce Andrews). These texts were often polemical and used free form but at the same time relied on categories from humanities and social sciences, sometimes occupying a middle ground between a manifesto and an academic paper (this has been characteristic of critical writing by Language authors in general). They reflected the authors' literary interests as well as their various non-literary affiliations (Bruce Andrews, for instance, is a political scientist).

Hence "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" contradicts to a degree Cusset's claim that theoretical journals imitated the literary experimental journals;

rather, in this case we deal with a productive convergence between theory and literature not only on the level of discourse (there is a close link between Language authors' critical and poetic writing), but on the level of material conditions of publishing. Such a convergence, which is often fallaciously attributed to a 'postmodern hybridity', is in fact a manifestation of a deep affinity between critical (avant-garde and neo-avant-garde) art, on the one hand, and critical theory, on the other; this affinity traverses the border between philosophy and literature. Indeed, Language writing with its political explorations has much more in common with the (leftist) social and philosophical thought than with some poetic movements in the US of mid – XX century. A similar example of literature and theory brought together within one publishing project is the Semiotext(e), which was founded in the US in the 1970s and has specialized both in philosophical theory and avant-gardist literature. In our view, this connection between avant-garde and critical theory was best manifested during the Whitney Biennial in March 2014 (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), where among exhibitions of experimental art one was dedicated to Semiotext(e) and its activity (the exhibition featured a television set with headphones which could be used to watch a lecture by Gilles Deleuze or Paul Virilio).

It is now worth addressing the idea that Language poetry is a literary offspring of poststructuralist theory; this idea still informs much of the literary criticism on the topic. This idea, in our view, prevents us from fully gauging the innovative character of this poetic project, as well as does not withstand criticism from the standpoint of intellectual and cultural history. On the one hand, certain aspects of Language writing – such as heightened focus on textuality and materiality of writing, as well as shunning of an expressive "I" – could indeed be linked to poststructuralism (Marjorie Perloff, for instance, connects the latter to the "larger post-structuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject" [9]), this is, once again, a matter of convergence rather than influence. In fact, the time difference between the first English publications of poststructuralist works and the beginning of 'Language' authors' poetic careers is hardly more than several years (for instance, Derrida's *Writing and Difference* was published in the US in 1978); that seems to be too short a timespan for any emergent philosophy to be properly assimilated, let alone inspire a whole literary movement. As the 'Language' poet Rae Armantrout recalls in an interview, "This was several years before we were aware of Derrida and post-structuralism, but when post-structuralist ideas did become widely available in the U.S., they **reinforced** Language Writing's move toward textuality" (emphasis mine – O.B.) [2]. Thus, the

fact that Language poetry has so often been characterized in poststructuralist terms demonstrates not so much its roots in this particular strain of theory but rather the critics' need for a interpretive framework to make sense of this highly experimental poetry.

Thus, we have outlined the publishing as well as intellectual context in which the formation of Language movement takes place in the 1960s–1970s. It has been attempted to demonstrate that the collective projects of the group should be understood as part of the general movement to create alternative publishing platforms in the U.S. The "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" journal occupies an important place in the history of alternative periodicals since it became a vehicle not only for the innovative and experimental poetry of the emerging group, but also for new trends in philosophical thought which, contrary to some critics' claims, did not impact the formation of a new poetics, but rather were assimilated later as they converged with some of the 'Language' poets' concerns about textuality. To conclude, we would like to point out that in spite of a high number of studies which link 'Language' writing to various philosophical theories, it still requires proper contextualization in terms of its place in American as well as transatlantic intellectual history, which could open up new areas of research on this literary phenomenon.

Works Cited

1. Andrews, Bruce. "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein / Bruce Andrews. – New York, NY: ROOF, 1990.
2. Armantrout, Rae. Interview by Carbajosa, Natalia. Jotdown. March 2012. Web. 7 Nov. [Электронный ресурс]. – Режим доступа. <<http://www.jotdown.es/2012/03/an-interview-to-rae-armantrout/>>. – Назва з екрана.
3. Arnold, David. *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* / Arnold, David. ; Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2007. Print.
4. Barthes, Roland. *Writing Degree Zero* (an excerpt). L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: Journal. No.2, April 1978. – Режим доступу. <http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/LANGUAGEN2/Language2.pdf>. – Назва з екрана.
5. Bernstein, Charles. *My Way: Speeches and Poems* / Bernstein, Charles. – Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.
6. Cusset, François. *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* / François Cusset. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Print.
7. Hartley, George. *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* / Hartley, George. – Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1989. Print.

8. Kim, Eleana. Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement. [Электронный ресурс] – 7 Nov. – 2014. – Режим доступа: <http://home.jps.net/~nada/language3.htm>. – Назва з екрана.

9. Perloff, Marjorie. "Language Poetry and The Lyric Subject." [Электронный ресурс]. –University of Buffalo. – New York. – 7 Apr. – 2014. – Режим доступа. <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/langpo.html>> – Назва з екрана.

10. Rancière, Jacques, and Steve Corcoran. Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics / Rancière, Jacques. – London : Continuum, 2010. Print.