The Topology of Extimacy in Language Poetry: Torus, Borromean Rings, and Klein Bottle*

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I. Arguments

The symposium called “The Politics of the Referent” was published in the Canadian journal *Open Letter* in 1977 and reprinted by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein as *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Supplement Number One* in 1980. In the journal, Steve McCaffery declares in his essay, “The Death of the Subject,” that literature has entered “a crisis of the sign,” and that the poet’s task is “to demystify the referential fallacy of language.” McCaffery further defines the concept of “reference” as “that kind of blindness a window makes of the pane, that motoric thrust of the word which takes you out of language into a tenuous world of the other and so prevents you [from] seeing what it is you see” (4).

Lyn Hejinian’s “Two Stein Talks” in *Temblor #3* (1986) displaces the blind window metaphor into that of “a carafe,” “a blind glass.” Hejinian spots Gertrude Stein’s “A Carafe, That Is A Blind Glass” in the first of *Tender Buttons*, and perceives that “[a] carafe is a container, a glass one, which, if filled with a thick liquid, that is a colored one, might be, so to speak, blind, opaque” (134).

In her “After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents” in *Contemporary Poetics* (2007), Marjorie Perloff spotted Steve McCaffery’s and Lyn Hejinian’s points of reference and the issue of opacity/transparency in poetic language, and theorizes that poetic language is not a window to be seen through, a transparent glass pointing to something outside it, but a system of signs with its own semiological interconnectedness which can be articulated in terms of “simultaneously struggling towards, yet refusing to become significations” (18). For the second generation of the language poetry, Perloff further perceptively

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displaces with supplements her insights of this issue of glass into that of “bottle” and “neck” by reading closely each poem of Fanny Howe’s “Scattered Light” and Nathaniel Mackey’s “Uninhabited Angel.”

Fanny Howe’s “Scattered Light”

It was a night to be left alone
To dig out fifteen pounds of pumpkin guts
Stick in a candle and water the curtains
I phoned a friend with What do you want
Money and luck they said
When I asked the angel in the bottle
She fluttered and cried
I want to die!
Sex, too, squeezes out a lot of pleasure
Till nothing is left but the neck (Temblor #4, 1986, 52)

Nathaniel Mackey’s “Uninhabited Angel”

Sat up sleepless in the Long Night, love
Stood me up. Stayed away though its
Doing so stirred me. Wine on my shirtsleeve,
Wind on my neck (Temblor #4, 1986, 36).

While providing a close reading of Fanny Howe’s poem which reminds the readers of W. C. Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Perloff demonstrates her issue of “the neck of the bottle” (25), the issue which is worthwhile to quote:

Failed domesticity probably looms as large here [. . .], but the relationship between the pumpkin carving of the opening, the allusion to the Cumaean Sybil trapped eternally in her bottle, and the image of the sex act hollowing out the body like an empty pumpkin cannot be transformed into any sort of coherent narrative. “Till nothing is left but the neck” is specially graphic. The neck of the bottle? The neck of the woman as external to the emptied-out body? The neck as all one has without money or luck? Oddly, my own image, if I am to follow McCafferey and become a coconstructor of the poem’s meaning, is that of a chicken neck: the hardly ugly piece of flesh (rather like a distorted penis or “stick in a candle”) that remains when one has hollowed out the chicken, as opposed to the pumpkin, guts—the liver, heart, and other giblets, the fat along the inside chicken wall. Phonemically, in any case, the monosyllabic “neck” in the final position connotes an