

Article

The New Commodity: Technicity and Poetic Form

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Abstract: One of the key strands of early thinking by the Language Poets, notably Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews and Steve McCaffery, was that the poem—particularly the mainstream, American lyric in thrall to the Imagist tradition—should be understood as partaking in the commodity system, either in its capacity of presenting the world itself as consumable or as a commodity itself. Strategies to retool the poem included an exaggerated de-naturalization of language (akin to Brecht’s *Verfremdung Effekt*), the permanent deferral of epiphany as “pay off” (i.e., writing as ongoing phenomenological investigation), and, most extremely, the poem as engaged in a “general” as opposed to a “closed” economy—as pure expenditure, linguistic waste, in George Bataille’s sense. These practices, however, while they might have, in theory, “de-commodified” the poem (the evidence weighs against it, but it’s quite impossible to prove), have nonetheless confirmed the centrality of the early notion by William Carlos Williams that a poem is a “machine,” an autonomous producer of meanings, and to that extent an object. The French philosopher Gilbert Simondon argues in his theory of technicity that something human lies at the heart of the technical object and that its technical essence, like any player in the Darwinian evolution, has its own evolutionary journey through time. In Bernard Stiegler’s succinct formulation, “[a]s a ‘process of exteriorization,’ technics is the pursuit of life by means other than life.” This confluence of ideas suggests a possibility: that the technical elements of poems—what might have formerly been understood as stylistic tics, characteristic methods, visual and prosodic features—are themselves engaged in a quest for “life,” and that poems are in fact always already objects, existing outside of the system of commodities if only by virtue of obtaining an ontological status both: (1) irreducible to an over-determined system of exchanges (an unreachable “essence” in Graham Harman’s “object-oriented ontology”), and (2) autonomous from the life, actions and intentions of the poem him/herself. To that degree, the focus of early Language poetry on configuring the poem against the system of commodities overstepped its reach by attempting to “de-objectify” the poem, to dissolve it among systems of relation. Poems are less human to the degree that they are not proxies for the poet him/herself or total subjects to the “social,” but more human to the degree that they contain—as a steam engine, a diode or a Swiss watch—a technical essence.

Keywords: language poetry; technicity; Simondon; Stiegler; Marx; Pound; Lerner; object-oriented ontology; indeterminacy

1. Language Poetry and the Commodity

The *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, published in 1984 and edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, is composed of roughly half of the first three volumes of the poetry journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978–1981), the fourth volume being its own perfect-bound issue of the Canadian journal *Open Letter* and still readily available at the time. Published by the Southern Illinois University Press with a decidedly tacky non-serif font, the book’s 295 pages didn’t include what the editors considered to be ephemeral material—“bibliographies, contributors’ lists of recommended readings, brief comments on current books, correspondence, and the like” [1]—a *remainder* that,

to readers stricken with the “archive fever” of a later age, those interested in a poetics of pure information like “conceptual writer” Danny Snelson, might have made for as interesting a perusal than the material deemed worth preserving.

One of the key tenets to which many of the Language Poets adhered was that poetry as generally understood—“mainstream,” any sort of “closed” or conventionally lyrical poetry, and not only poems written with traditional forms—was offered to the world in the guise of a *commodity*. Adding a strong dose of Frankfurt School and Althusserian Marxism to Charles Olson’s cosmological arguments in “Projective Verse” which described an “open” verse (composed by “field,” a constellation of “actual occasions” in Whitehead’s terminology) in opposition to the “verse which print bred,” the Language poets argued that “closed” verse was *consumable* in the way that, say, television shows, feature films or magazine articles are. Making a large conceptual leap, they also argued that such poems-as-commodities gave an impression of the world *itself* as consumable; objects depicted in “transparent” writing were, via their enumeration, fixed as things that could be owned. Conventional verse, situated *outside* the world—pointing to a transcendental subject, the “author,” yet consequently imposing a master discourse, that of the State—and not *in* the world—aware of its status as a text among many, perhaps merely as the *trace* of a process rather than fortified object—obscured a truer understanding of experience as an indeterminate continuity (there is a strong strand of phenomenology underlying the materialist critique) shaped as much by a collective and as an individual symbolic order. Instead, mainstream or “closed” poems, the types in the *New Yorker* and the mass of academic reviews that played a much larger role in poetry publications at the time, sliced consciousness itself into discrete units by a knife marked “epiphany” and shipped to anyone for a price.

A more subtle argument, distinguishable from the crypto-Marxist, phenomenological one above, suggested that words in the average poem, and in fact the poem itself, were being construed by the conventional poem as *instrumental*—of some “use” as “tools”—a natural corollary (if discovered after a detour through Heidegger’s writing on technology) to the argument that poems were commodities that quantified the world. Of course, any notion that poems could be understood as *tools* was a bad thing—poems, in the minds of the Language poets (and not inconsistent with forebears from the Romantics to the New Americans) should constitute a special class of objects that not only remained unsullied by ephemeral, goal-oriented activities but that refreshed the reader’s relationship to the *real*, reconfiguring this relationship from the closed “self” and “commodity” binary to, perhaps (they generally avoided capital-letter abstractions), that of an intersubjective “Thought” and or a multiple “Being.” The idea that poems should not be understood as commodities extended to the idea that poems should not be seen as instrumental, and yet a contradiction arises as a *function* was clearly outlined by the Language poets for what poems could do, namely, address what other poems and language was *already* doing as conduits of ideology, rendering the world into commodities. However, a description of how individual poems worked (“close reading” or the New Criticism still ascendant when these poets were in school) were eschewed in favor of discussions that crossed over into general linguistics (Saussure, Jakobson and the later Wittgenstein were touchstones) and ideology critique.

2. Technicity

A different discourse about linguistic objects and instrumentality than what the Language poets had to offer is to understand poems as technical objects, situated somewhere between texts and machines and marked by a degree of *technicity*. On a basic level, one could argue that the figuration of the poem as commodity that comes out of Marx misses the point when applied to the valuation of poems. Marx’s general objection to the commodity-form wasn’t that the commodity as object had *uses*—in fact, he felt that the use-value of the commodity was much closer to an unalienated view of what an object was than its exchange-value—but that the object, once entering the sphere of exchange and speculation, became alienated from its creator, became corrupted by an imposed exchange value, and obtained the quasi-mystical “fetish” quality that is an amalgamation of labor relations, all of which would be hard to map over the relationship of the author, poem and reader. *Instrumentality* of the

commodity doesn't figure in Marx's equation except in the cases in which he considers the capitalist's investment in new capital, new machines of production, which departs from the standard circles of production, labor and distribution.

French philosopher and historian of technology Gilbert Simondon articulates a line of battle between *all* technical objects and what is conventionally called "culture" in the introduction of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*¹.

Culture has become a system of defense against technics; now, this defense appears as a defense of man based on the assumption that technical objects contain no human reality. We should like to show that culture fails to take into account that there is a human reality in technical reality and that, if it is to fully play its role, culture must come to incorporate technical entities into its body of knowledge and its sense of values. [. . .] The most powerful cause of alienation in the contemporary world resides in this failure to understand the machine, which is not caused by the machine but by the non-understanding of its nature and essence, by its absence from the world of meanings, and by its omission from the table of values that are part of culture. [2]

Technological objects are not simply replacements for humans, and certainly not just tools subservient to humans, but "what resides in machines is human reality, human action fixed and crystalized in functioning structures" [2]. Simondon's central, radical insight here is that humanists have been conditioned, at least since the Romantic period, to think of machines as products of the most abject, least "human" side of creativity and therefore they craft philosophies that merely treat technology as a necessary plague. Simondon instead argues that there is "human reality in technical reality," that machines are indeed an "other" to the human and are closer to being human than, say, a stone, a bird or the stars due to the *crystallization* of human functions in their operations. Bernard Stiegler draws much of his thinking on technics from Simondon (along with paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan and a host of more canonical thinkers). Stiegler states in the general introduction to his three volume *Technics and Time* that "technics evolves *more quickly* than culture" and that his project will be to show

how various contributions to the history of technical evolution permit the hypothesis that between the inorganic beings of the physical sciences and the organic beings of biology, there does indeed exist a third genre of "being": "inorganic organized beings," or technical objects. These nonorganic organizations of matter have their own dynamic when compared with that of either physical or biological beings, a dynamic, moreover, that cannot be reduced to the "aggregate" or "product" of these beings. [. . .]

Life is the conquest of mobility. As a "process of exteriorization," technics is the pursuit of life by means other than life. [3]

The concerns of Simondon and Stiegler are on both an ontological level—they wish to describe this third order of being and demonstrate how it evolves according to its own laws and processes beyond the human—and phenomenological—suggesting that a rapprochement of the human with the technical (which contains, in Simondon's phrase, "human reality") lies at the heart of various industrial-era ills, including most poignantly the failure of human *individuation* in an age of technological *milieus* (these two terms are central to Simondon's thought).

In this, both Simondon and Stiegler follow closely on the call by Marx, in a famous footnote in the first volume of *Capital*:

¹ This book, published in France in 1958, has not yet been published in English though drafts of a translation of about two thirds of it are available online. The initial translation was made by Ninian Mellamphy in 1980 and revised in 2010.

A critical history of technology would show how little any of the inventions of the eighteenth century are the work of a single individual. As yet such a book does not exist. Darwin has directed attention to the history of natural technology, i.e., the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which serve as the instruments of production for sustaining their life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man in society, of organs that are the material basis of every particular organization of society, deserve equal attention? [4]

Marx's cursory linking of Darwin's evolutionary theories and the history of the "productive organs of society" anticipates the central, distinctive theme of Simondon's philosophy: that technology develops through history toward greater states of *concretization*, perhaps a form of "perfection," that resembles the progress of life forms through time toward a greater fitness with a given environment—a *milieu*, or, in the language of Uexküll, *Umwelt*. As Arthur Bradley notes, "In the view of a number of influential commentators from Kostas Axelos up to Jacques Derrida himself, Karl Marx is nothing less than the first think of technology—*le premier penseur de la technique*," [5] and "he breaks decisively with the classical theory of technology: what-is-placed-in-front-of man, pros-thetically, for Aristotle, is placed *within* man, intra-thetically, for Marx" [5]. The machine Marx is largely interested in is always the "*productive* machine" [5], that is, those that produce their own power rather than derive it from man, animal or nature, and to this degree the *autonomous* machine—in Simondon's view, one that has acquired an *essence*. The machine "[embodies] the real subsumption of living labour . . . by dead or frozen labour" [5], a process that leads to an entirely new, and co-dependent, ecology:

For Marx . . . human species-existence (if we can still use such a term to name something in which the human itself is only one element) is both *productive of*, and *produced by*, its technical interactions with its environment: man and matter invent one another through the medium of the tool. It becomes possible, in the light of such a conclusion, to imagine a Marxian materialist genealogy (rather than a simple anthropology) of the human where, as Amy Wendling notes, "the embodiment of different forms of tools produces different types of human being." [5]

Echoing concepts dear to N. Katherine Hayles, Marx's "account at times seems to anticipate the kind of 'extended' or 'distributed' quality" in its imagining of the human body "that contemporary cognitive philosophy now regularly attributes to mind" [5]. Simondon posits a "successful coupling of the schematic corporeality of man and machine" that, he acknowledges, is punctuated by periods of "discontinuity" [6]. Simondon is, therefore, a humanist in the Marxist tradition—his central problem is that of human emancipation and creativity—but is also a rather new brand of psychologist, one who advocates a rapprochement between humans and technical objects as a form of social therapy, a notion that would be expanded by Stiegler as a central component of what he calls the *pharmakon*.

3. Toy Made Out of Words

This rehearsal the Language poets' notion of the poem as commodity and the envisioning of a "third order of being," that of the technical object, in Simondon and Stiegler should be suggestive to anyone with a basic understanding of Modernist poetics, most explicitly of William Carlos Williams' concept of the poem as a "machine made of words." I will forego any deep engagement with Williams, however, except to say that his tendency to avoid abstraction, to avoid puns, clever wordplay, and literary allusion, demonstrates his understanding of the poem as "concrete" in Simondon's sense. Ezra Pound's valorization in the *ABC of Reading* of "inventors" whose "extant work gives us the first known example of a [new] process" over "masters" (who exploit inventions perhaps better than the inventors) and "diluters" (just okay) is also apposite [7]. Simondon's own notion of "invention" verges on the definition of "discovery," as one simply can't invent without "capitalizing [on] natural forces, laws, principles, materials and their potential modes and transformation" [8]. Most importantly, Simondon understand invention as a form of *thought* itself:

To invent is to make one's thought work as a machine works, neither according to causality, which is too fragmentary, nor according to purpose, which is too unitary, but according to the dynamism of lived functioning, understood as a product, and understood also in its genesis. The machine is a being that works. Its mechanisms give material expression to a coherent dynamism that once existed in thought, and that was thought. [2]

The highest form of invention in Simondon's view is *epiphenomenal* in that it derives from an extant set of materials a previously inexistent form of essence: "The beginning of a lineage of technical objects is marked by the synthetic act of the constitutive invention of a technical essence. Technical essence can be recognized by the fact that it remains stable across an evolutionary line, and not only stable, but also productive of structures and functions through internal development and progressive saturation" [2]. Jean-Hugues Barthélémy notes that Simondon had in fact a similar understanding to Pound of the cyclical nature of the process invention sets in motion:

[Simondon] will therefore distinguish between:

- (1) the first invention of a technical *essence*, as the absolute origin of a lineage, such as the technical essence of "the internal combustion engine"
- (2) the *continuous*, minor optimizations that take place within this technical essence as it progressively realizes itself
- (3) the *discontinuous* invention made necessary by the "saturation of the system" that results from a continuous series of minor optimizations. This discontinuous invention is that in which the technical object really "concretizes" itself as reality of a progress, such as the invention of the diesel engine within the technical essence of the "internal combustion engine." [8]

That is, a new *essence*, the "internal combustion engine," is introduced by the inventor and goes through a *continuous* process of improvement, ultimately converging with other technical essences (machines exploiting diesel fuel) and making the *discontinuous* leap into the new individual, the diesel engine.

Pound's set of writings collected under the title "Machine Art (1927–1930)" provides an image of the poet having an almost mystical relationship to the operations of machines on a par with Simondon's (and Marx's, for that matter). Pound notes that "spare parts [and] assembled machinery" will "more readily awaken [the] eye" than "galleries of painting or sculpture" as the *form* of machines, not just their architectural quality but the "mobile parts [where] energy is most concentrated," educates us in the experience of art, moving beyond wondering "whether they would like to know the lady who sat [or] whether the emotions of the painter were such as would ultimately produce a state of satisfied satiety" [9]. Pound reverses the division initiated by Aristotle between the productions of nature (*poiesis*) and culture (*technê*), an act of linguistic manipulation as "in Greek culture, *poieō* and *technê* both include the meaning of an activity of generating, producing and of making something" [9]. "The category of *technê* . . . is the new aesthetic dimension which destroys the idea of art as imitation, all the psychologisms inherent in the idea of beauty, and the idea of style as ornamental" [9]. Pound's famous anecdote (recounted in Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*) of the writing of "In a Station of the Metro" is an allegory of technological individuation. The short, "hokku"-like poem, whittled down from 30 lines over the course of a year, is "a simile with the 'like' suppressed: Pound called it an equation, meaning not a redundancy, *a* equals *a*, but a generalization of unexpected exactness. The statements of analytic geometry, he said, "are 'lords' over fact" [9]. Can we not suggest something of Simondon's description of the elevation of a technical *ensemble*—in which separate elements of a machine perform their operations, moving some aspect of the product to the next element, without otherwise affecting it—to a technical *individual*—in which parts of the machine perform several functions in direct and specific interaction with a *milieu*, in Pound's example of "condensare"?

I would like to suggest that poems, particularly the lyric (or short poem), “succeeds” to the level that it approaches something like the technicity of a technical individual (even as poets like Charles Bernstein will write “successful” poems that resist this drive). Words and phrases in such poems withstand multiple, distinct readings—they achieve a state of undecidability—while closing off possible readings, an act akin to the notion in linguistics of “binding” between a pronoun and the expressions with which they are co-referential. Poems can, in fact, be understood as a non-machinic coming-to-terms with the presence of technical essences, the continuation of life “by means other than life.” The Language poets, in a somewhat improvised way, put in opposition what they see as two distinct notions about poetry: the concept of the poem as “commodity” (object, machine, product of labor, subject to exchange and distribution) and the concept of the poem as a phenomenological investigation (unending, indeterminate, concerned with relations and not essences, an authentic examination of consciousness as it engages with the real). But the Language poets might have missed, due to an instinctual defense of “culture” against “technics,” the human “reality” in the technical object which, I am arguing, they associated (as did Olson) with the “closed,” “transparent” lyric. In their reading of Marx, in which the commodity is supposed to be entirely discredited as an object (some curse inflicted upon humankind by capitalism) and the instrumentality of words somehow corrupts a deeper essence, they missed another possibility: that the “disappearance of the word” doesn’t provide a window onto the “real” but, rather, conjures into visibility the technological essence of the poem.

4. Ben Lerner’s *The Lichtenberg Figures*

Ben Lerner’s first book *Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), a sequence of sonnet-like poems that, like Harryette Mullen’s celebrated *Muse & Drudge*, conjures a ghostly, invisible formal ideal over the course of its reading, is to me emblematic of a concern with the *technicity* of poems. Lerner methodically explores the various forms of integrity possible to a constellation of words on a page, often explicitly subjecting words and phrases to discreet, contradictory meanings, often through the means of repetition (and not allusion). *Lichtenberg Figures* is also unique in that it does not forego many of the freedoms New York School poets such as John Ashbery and Ted Berrigan explored—playful indeterminacy, the collaging of different cultural and affective registers, the casual, if urbane humor and so forth—but also signals a return to the notion of a lyric poem having a formal integrity, a finitude, a boundedness or completeness, that any New Critic would admire. The first poem runs in its entirety:

The dark collects our empties, empties our ashtrays.
 Did you mean “this could go on forever” in a good way?
 Up in the fragrant rafters, moths seek out a finer dust.
 Please feel free to cue or cut

the lights. Along the order of magnitudes, a glyph,
 portable, narrow—Damn. I’ve lost it. But its shadow. Cast
 in the long run. As the dark touches us up.
 Earlier you asked if I would enter the data like a room, well,

either the sun has begun to burn
 its manuscripts or I’m an idiot, an idiot
 with my eleven semiprecious rings. Real snow
 on the stage. Fake blood on the snow. Could this go

on forever in a good way? A brain left lace from age or lightning.
 The chicken is a little dry and/or you’ve ruined my life. [10]

There is much to observe in general about this poem, but I think it best to sketch its activities line-by-line to isolate its infernal machinations.

The dark collects our empties, empties our ashtrays.

The most salient aspect of this first line is the doubled use of the word “empties,” which moves from being a colloquialism meaning empty beer cans to a verb being performed by the “dark” on “ashtrays.” This play on discrete definitions point to the excluded middle, the non-semantic border between meanings—the space of the undecidable. The dark is, of course, the void, and thus Lerner informs us early that “meaning” in these poems can bottom out into aporia over the space of a comma. Waste and anxiety—empties and ashtrays—are introduced as conceptual figures.

Did you mean “this could go on forever” in a good way?

“This could go on forever” is a phrase that can mean, with a slight tonal shift, either that one wants something to *not* end or that one is in despair that something will *never* end. Unlike with the previous use of the word “empties,” the repetition is internal, and as we have entered, *in media res*, an intimate conversation. Having no access to a sound recording to help render this line unambiguous, two distinct meanings are put in play, and not a polysemantic plethora or rampant “indeterminacy,” all without the use of a proper pun. Our narrator is suspicious, anxious, picking up on the theme of the first line.

Up in the fragrant rafters, moths seek out a finer dust.

This line is curious—“finer” to whom, the moths? “Fragrant” to whom (few of us spend time in the rafters)? Moths offer a suggestion of the non-human, though not quite the machine (maybe Nagel’s bat?). This is Ashberian in its sudden turn, as if distracted or *wanting out*, to imagining another location (“In a far recess of summer / Monks are playing soccer.”)

*Please feel free to cue or cut
the lights.*

Lerner plays with a poetics of deconstruction or perhaps pure difference, as the word “dust” produces through paragrammatic play the words “cue” and “cut,” each of which is linked by two letters but have little semantic connection. A void is opened up by this sudden deixis, a gesture to the reader (again, Ashberian). The figures of light and dark return.

*Along the order of magnitudes, a glyph,
portable, narrow—Damn. I’ve lost it. But its shadow. Cast
in the long run. As the dark touches us up.*

“The order of magnitudes” suggest a sort of pre-semantic realm, not unlike Simondon’s concept of the pre-individual or Deleuze’s “plane of immanence,” which can generally be categorized as the void from which concepts and objects emerge. A “glyph” is only “portable, narrow” when it’s not subject to the sequential ordering of an alphabet (and, of course, a word); it must have sped by quite quickly or perhaps never fully entered existence—not quite potential, not quite concrete—unlike its shadow. Can this “glyph” be an element of a formal language, as in the supra-alphabetic elements of Frege’s “concept-language”? “Touches us up” returns us, finally, to the sort of wordplay that characterized the earlier part of the poem. Is this a cosmetic “touch up” (picking up on the cued lights) or being “felt up” in an unwelcome sexual way? The “dark,” done emptying ashtrays, returns as a character from the first line.

*Earlier you asked if I would enter the data like a room, well,
either the sun has begun to burn
its manuscripts or I'm an idiot, an idiot
with my eleven semiprecious rings.*

"Enter" is either the mindless clicking of keys in a low-level white collar job, the act of walking through a door, or—as if something synthesis of the two—immersing oneself in a virtual world (like the cyber-cowboys of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*). Again, three *distinct* meanings are put into play. We are conditioned to think of the sun burning *something else*, confirmed until the enjambment; unlike the glyph but like the dark, the sun has somehow become a creative (and highly self-critical) individual, suggesting that all of history is merely writing by a frustrated mediocrity. The "I" moves from vague, general "idiot" to a concrete, narrativized idiot possessing ostentatious jewelry drenched in the aura of myth (like some cross between Forrest Gump, the Hobbit and Liberace).

*Real snow
on the stage. Fake blood on the snow.*

Another variation of the original technical element, linguistic doubling, but this time applied to the visual. The allusion is to a cinematic, rather than stage, simulacrum, as it's generally only in film that one might find fake blood in real snow. These two images merge into one, but operate like a Möbius strip: we are left somewhere quite specific, but are vulnerable to reversals with the flip of a world. (These lines are recycled as the final line of *Lichtenberg Figures*, suggestively preceded by the line "Vallejo's unpublished snow.")

*Could this go
on forever in a good way?*

Just before the sonnet's volta, the narrator asks the question that the poetic sequence itself might be seeking: how to reconcile a poetics of *becoming*, the poem's emergence as it draws upon the speed of thought, and the object of the poem itself which, in the tradition of the Language poetics but extending back to the Romantics, aspires to escape *technicity* (or formality) in a bid for something like *authenticity* (communication of "essential" meaning, or vulgar communication). Lerner settles on a meaning for "going on forever," namely the good version of play and pleasure, but knows the poem must indeed end. We are also reminded of the direct address—we are now included in the intimate conversation—introduced earlier.

A brain left lace from age or lightning.

I'm not quite sure what to make of this line. There is a suggestion of Alzheimer's disease (associated with plaques and tangles in the brain) but with an aesthetic virtue, the intricacies of lace, evoking Eliot's line about James: "He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." Missing the Oxford comma, the line can be two objects—it's either a "brain" or "lightning"—or one brain incapacitated by one of two unrelated causalities.

The chicken is a little dry and/or you've ruined my life.

This seems to be a play on both the "dailiness" aspect of much later New York School poetry—just put down what's in front of you as you're writing, no observation is too trivial—but is also the final twist of the extending beyond the "game" of the poem in the way the final seconds of a comedy sketch can just throw all the pieces into the air (the Queen enters in "Royal Family Doctor"). The final phrase echoes Rilke's "Archaic Torso of

Apollo” (“You must change your life” in Stephen Mitchell’s translation) or James Wright’s “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” which also ends with a reference to the dark and a chicken: “I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on./A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home./I have wasted my life.” As the concluding line, it’s notable that these two options share an “and/or,” following through on the note of undecidability that the act of linguistic doubling creates.

The Lichtenberg Figures doesn’t fetishize technology or the machinic in the manner known from the Flarf, conceptual, digital or neo-Oulipian writers, and yet its manner of evoking a limited array of distinct meanings from the repetition, or internal division, of words or phrases can be explained by Simondon’s emphasis of the multi-functionality of parts in a technical object. The language manages to be denatured (or deterritorialized in Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation) in a fashion familiar to anyone who has read New York School or Language writing, but manages to keep the option open for the sort of “personism” that Frank O’Hara advocated—the poem as direct address to at least one (or *only* one) other individual.

Most of the poems in *Lichtenberg Figures* display this feature of linguistic doubling, though some are also notable for fictional elements (a character named “Orlando Duran,” recalling Stevens’ various characters, appears on occasion), anaphora, pop cultural references (“Oops, I did it again”), notes of cultural or literary criticism (“Deliberately elliptical poetic works reflect a fear of political commitment after 1968”), and in one case an assault on the paratextual material of the book itself by setting it to verse.

The author gratefully acknowledges the object world.
Acknowledgement is gratefully made
to *Sleep: A Journal of Sleep*.
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which poured its money into the sky.
A grant from the sky made this project impossible.

Lerner, Benjamin, 1979–1945

The Lichtenberg figures/Benjamin Lerner
p. cm.

ISBN 1-55659-211-6 (pbk.: alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS2343.E23432A6 1962

911'.01-dc43 52-28544

CIP [10]

The most extreme form of recursion in the volume, this poem has the distinct virtue of being partly true: though Lerner did not, of course, die in 1945, he was born in 1979, and the ISBN number is indeed 1-55659-211-6. This poem is *suspended* by the invisible figure of the Lerner sonnet which we’ve encounter by this point through 42 previous poems. The poem asks at once to be verified by a renewed reading of the copyright page, but it also asks to be verified as 14-lines long with some of the qualities—the punning, the linguistic doubling (“*Sleep: A Journal of Sleep*”), characteristic of the other works.

The poems of *Lichtenberg Figures* can have the feel of being great improvisations—the colloquial, the associative, the trivial, can make their way into any of the poems—but all of the phrases seem to get picked up, to be doubled, to be rendered ambiguous but also to acquire two or more specific meanings while not losing their “instrumentality” in the workings of a highly orchestrated, condensed lyrical machine. I associate this practice with a type of technics that Simondon helps us describe with his language of abstract “ensembles” converging into concrete “elements.” Lerner’s poems are also agents in something I will call—picking up from Simondon in his description of technical ensembles, most prevalent in our own age of information technology—with *negentropy*, the movement *toward* form

rather than toward the heat death of entropy with which the Language poets might have unwittingly become associated due to their resistance to formal closure (and the greater fame of novelists like Pynchon and DeLillo). These qualities mark *The Lichtenberg Figures*, along with Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*, as symptomatic of a rapprochement of poetry and science, or writing and technics, even if that is not (as it is in *Crystallography* and other 'pataphysical works in the Canadian tradition) a stated goal. Both sequences treat the poem as something of a *function*—the ghostly, invisible ideal—in which various values can be inserted for different effects. In both cases the actual function exists merely as a form of which each succeeding poem is a variation or instance; in Lerner's case, this form is something resembling a sonnet, and in Mullen's, a four quatrain ballad. Plays of interruption, suspension and recursion are, naturally, prevalent in Lerner's sequence, but *The Lichtenberg Figures*, being by turns syllogistic and full on non-sequiturs, suggest a greater relationship with Simondonian technicity as the poems appear to want to express arguments, albeit in a circular way.

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