American Language Poetry and the Definition of the Avant-Garde

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A number of papers in the Edinburgh Conference on the Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde raised questions about the authenticity or otherwise of the so-called neo-avant-garde. In the case of Oulipo, for example, David Bellos claimed that the group is not avant-garde because of its lack of manifestos and its institutional organization, which resembles a “gentlemen’s dining club”. According to Bellos’s description, “the term ‘avant-garde’ is inapplicable to the Oulipo, whilst remaining just about the only term we have for describing its position with respect to the field of literature” (2002). This comment raises the issue of the use of the term “avant-garde”. On the one hand, it might be used for a narrow range of work produced prior to the Second World War in Europe. On the other hand, there is a range of work produced after this period in response to this work, or otherwise exhibiting striking similarities in practice and rhetoric, which in this sense might also be termed “avant-garde”.

As Richard Sheppard notes in his book Modernism — Dada — Postmodernism, the distinction, made by Peter Bürger, and others such as Raymond Williams (see, for example, the chapters “The Language of the Avant-Garde”, and “The Politics of the Avant-Garde” in Williams 1989: 49–80), between “high modernism” and the avant-garde “was a necessary corrective to the tendency of critics, especially in North America, to use the terms avant-garde and
modernism interchangeably and represented a key move in the offensives against New Criticism with its central doctrine of artistic autotelicity” (2000: 6). In the same breath, Sheppard also notes that the distinction is flawed. What I want to examine here is the way in which the American language poets, a group active in the 1970s and 1980s, inherited the North American tendency to lump modernism and the avant-garde together, while also being part of a reaction against New Criticism. “Language poetry” demonstrates many of the difficulties in separating the two legacies and, contrary to Bürger’s view in his Theory of the Avant-Garde, the ongoing relevance of modernism and the avant-garde in contemporary art. By examining the insights and shortcomings of Bürger’s theory in the light of language poetry, I do not want so much to argue for or against the authenticity of the language poetry as an avant-garde movement, but rather to look at ways in which the movement both does and does not fit Bürger’s characterization of the avant-garde.

The difficulty of categorizing language poetry as either avant-garde or otherwise is partly due to the difference between the “the field of literature” in North America and Europe. In the former, as Sheppard and many others have pointed out, the use of avant-garde and modernism as synonyms reflected an environment in which high modernist approaches could be combined in a new way with avant-garde attitudes and rhetoric. In poetry, in particular, the widespread conservatism toward modernist innovation in poetry has meant that there has been a constant battle for a more full-blooded modernist legacy, which has often been automatically considered “avant-garde”. Consistent with this North American approach, a group like the “language poets” has significant points of contact with both high modernist and avant-garde literature from the first half of the twentieth century.

The work of the philosopher and art historian Arthur Danto has also been concerned with the continuities and oppositions between the avant-garde and high modernism. Danto’s view of art history associates the term “avant-garde” with exactly the art with which Bürger contrasts the avant-garde. Danto, for example, picks up on Clement Greenberg’s theory of modern art and the avant-garde. But while for Greenberg, avant-garde and modernist art aims “to collapse the distinction between reality and art,” to make art “not mean