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New Poetries

Aaron Kunin

Two reasons for studying new poetry are suggested by Arthur Rimbaud in *A Season in Hell* where he writes that 'one must be absolutely modern' (Rimbaud 1945: 87). The mood of this sentence is ambiguous. 'Must' could be a wish, implying that modernisation is a duty (poets should work hard to become as modern as possible); or, alternately, 'must' could be grimly deterministic, implying a historical necessity (poets are modern because they live in the modern period).

Consider the wish-reading. You must always be completely modern because novelty and originality are the primary criteria of value, as in the motto adopted by Ezra Pound in *The Cantos*, 'Make it new' (Pound 1940: 11). To make something, such as a poem, that has no precedent in the history of forms is a heroic act. This reading is based on a romantic notion of poetic composition (you invent an image out of your unique self and project it beyond yourself, like a lamp, which consumes its own fuel in order to illuminate the world) as opposed to a classical one (you follow an assigned pattern, like a mirror, which receives an image from outside, from nature).

The limitations of the romantic aesthetic for any account of new poetries are:

- Novelty and originality are never the only values.
- A lot of the best new poetry is explicitly anti-romantic, introduces no new ideas, uses exclusively pre-fabricated material, and attempts to dismantle the individual human speaking subject. (See the section on 'Non-intentional writing' below.)
- Poetry is almost never original. New poetry typically authorises itself in reference to its own encoded history. Even Pound uses models from Confucian China, Jeffersonian America, and fascist Italy to authorize his practice of making new.

These limitations are visible in some of the unwieldy names by which the subject of this chapter is known in criticism: 'innovative poetry' (which implies that poetry has an expiration date), 'non-traditional poetry' (which implies that poetry could exist apart from any tradition of reading and writing), 'experimental poetry' (which implies a lack of finish or polish – 'Whoops! Well, there's my experiment, back to the drawing board, etc.' – or, more sympathetically, a Baconian attitude, as though one might make a discovery or proof in the process of writing), 'avant-garde poetry' (which implies a progressive and militaristic history of literature), and 'post-avant poetry' (which defaults on the possibility of any future avant-garde activity).

Here is one further illustration of these limitations. John Cage, whose characteristic works are based on chance operations, always maintained that he was not interested in novelty. Cage tells a story in which a friend observes that the 'most shocking thing' he could do when invited to lecture would be to give a normal lecture – no one would expect that. Cage's response to this proposal is that he doesn't write and deliver lectures in order to shock people, but rather 'out of a need for poetry' (Cage 1961: x). Cage, one of the most radical artists in history, is careful to distinguish shock from poetic value. His point is well taken. Some gaps in the history of form-making are felicitous; not all untried forms would represent an improvement on the available ones.

Now consider the determinist reading of 'must'. You are already modern, whether you want to be or not, whether you know it or not. This is a very good reason for studying new poetry, no matter what kind of poetry is important to you. A question for all poets in the first years of the twenty-first century is: what do we want the poetry of the next century to be? If a well-tempered poetry is what you want, you will have to look at many examples of different kinds of poetry in order to determine the rules according to which they operate or should operate. Also, remember that many ways of writing poetry, which no one has seen yet, are possible. Even if you want to resist or reject old or new models for writing and understanding poetry, you still may need to study them, simply because they are part of your culture, and because sheer ignorance may not be the most effective mode of critique. In short: new poetry is whatever we poets do. That is both a threat and a promise.

What have poets been doing for the past century? Here are some generalisations. The most advanced art of the modern period:

- Is interested in the elemental and primordial (medium and object specificity)
- Includes process in product (a procedural aesthetic)
- Is structured as theme-and-variations (a recursive rather than progressive paradigm)
- Privileges the non-recurrent element (non-commensurability).

We will fill in some of the details as we proceed.

Intentional writing

In his lectures on Shakespeare, Samuel Coleridge distinguishes between what he calls 'mechanical form', in which a limit on what a poem can and can't say is imposed from outside, and 'organical form', which he prefers, where a poem discovers its own limits (Coleridge 2004: 325, 515). Confusingly, his examples of organic form are trees and people rather than poems. Sol LeWitt makes a more precise statement of this distinction in his 'Paragraphs on conceptual art'. According to LeWitt, there are two strategies for making art. In the normal, intuitive, organic way, you're constantly discovering new problems and improvising responses to them. What colour should this be? What materials should I use? What scale am I working on? You have to make a whole new set of decisions at every stage of the project. In the other, conceptual way, you make all the decisions before you start working 'and the execution becomes a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art' (LeWitt 1996: 822). In the conceptual way, all the creative energy goes into the idea. It isn't necessary to do the labour of turning the idea into an object, and you certainly don't have to perform this labour yourself; you can hire someone to 'fabricate' the object. The distinction, whether organical/mechanical or intuitive/conceptual, is not between imposing form and not imposing form, because LeWitt believes that you can't

have art without some degree of control. The question is: 'At what point in the process are you going to introduce the controls?' Either you plan ahead, or else you have to improvise.

The international literary society called the *Ouvroir pour la littérature potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature, or Oulipo) represents an extreme commitment to planning. This group, formed in the 1960s by the writer Raymond Queneau and the mathematician François LeLionnais, was originally supposed to explore links between poetry and mathematics, with special attention to the design of a poetry-writing machine. An important early work in this mode is Queneau's book *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, a collection of ten sonnets in which each line, helpfully printed on a separate strip of paper, can be combined with others to produce the astronomical number of formally exact, thematically coherent poems given in the title. This is a work of 'potential literature' in that no single person, including its author, can read all the possible poems in a lifetime. The Oulipo has become increasingly identified with 'restrictive forms' – historical ones such as the sonnet, sestina, and lipogram (writing without a chosen letter of the alphabet, a formal procedure made famous by Georges Perec's novel *La disparition*, which does not include the letter 'e'), as well as recent inventions such as the septina, devised by Jacques Roubaud. Some members of the group believe that these restrictive forms are of conceptual and aesthetic interest in their own right (such as Perec, who always made his process of composition explicit in the work or in prefaces addressed to his readers), while others believe that the restrictive forms are of merely practical interest (such as Queneau, who tried to avoid making his arcane compositional systems available to readers and critics).

The use of restrictive forms is obviously intended as an expression of control. Particularly for Queneau, control is an ethic: nothing should happen in a text that has not been planned by the writer. Artists should be fully aware of the rules governing their decisions, because otherwise they are 'slaves to rules of which they know nothing' (Queneau 1986: 64). However, one advantage for writers who work with restrictive forms is the loss of control in later stages of composition. John Ashbery has said that writing a sestina is like riding a bicycle downhill, when the pedals start pushing your legs instead of the other way around (Packard 1974: 124); the six repeating end-words of the sestina effectively become 'a machine for making art', as LeWitt might say. Placing a limit on one area of decision-making encourages surprising inventions in other areas. You think what you would not otherwise have thought, and write what you would not otherwise have written.

Non-intentional writing

For some writers, the goal, which may be an impossible one, is not to express an intention, or not to have an intention at all. This is an ancient idea: for example, the classical poet is often imagined as a conduit through which a divine voice speaks. In the twentieth century, William Yeats used his wife's automatic writing, ostensibly dictated by spirit voices, as a source of 'metaphors for his poetry'. The use of automatic writing and dream imagery in surrealist poetry was supposed to connect poets not to a spirit-world but to a deeper reality than that of conscious awareness. Similarly, William Burroughs used chance operations (cut-ups, fold-ins, etc.) to make his novels subject to a 'third mind' not his own. Jack Spicer called his mature poetry 'dictated' in that it consisted of messages from an outside source that he sometimes described as 'Martians' or 'ghosts' but that he was apparently not curious to identify. Hannah Weiner called her mature poetry 'clairvoyant' in that it was based on words that she either 'saw' (on objects, on the bodies of people, and sometimes suspended in air) or 'heard' (here she made a difficult distinction between words that had

a determinate physical source, words that had no apparent source, and words that were spoken 'silently') and then transcribed and interpreted.

A more sustained, rigorous effort to divest poetry of intention occurs in the work of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low. Cage's use of chance operations in order to generate writing is not as well known as his chance-based musical compositions, but is part of the same project. His typical procedure as a writer was to 'write through' another text, such as Ezra Pound's *Cantos* or James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, using a mesostic. Cage would start with a keyword, usually the name of his subject (for example, 'Ezra Pound') then write a poem using words from *The Cantos* containing letters from the keyword. The resulting poem *Writing through the Cantos* is planned by Cage but does not express his intentions, opinions, or (this claim is dubious) his taste; its diction and syntax are determined solely by the source text and the keyword.

The ultimate aesthetic ideal for such poetry would be to perform an action, such as writing, without leaving a trace. Failing that, the ideal would be to make the smallest possible intervention, as in the work of the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, who made a series of sculptures using blocks of wood as materials in which each block received exactly one cut from a radial arm saw. For writers, the advantage of using chance operations is that you don't have to be special – you can write poetry without being a genius and without having a privileged relationship with an outside source (gods, muses, spirits, Martians, etc.). You can write poetry in mundane circumstances, even when you don't feel like a genius. Moreover, the labour is not taxing. Cage liked to quote the following Zen poem: 'without lifting a finger I pound the rice' (Cage 1995: 174).

Another recent iteration of this project is Kenneth Goldsmith's 'uncreative writing'. Goldsmith's main activity as a writer is transcription – of a phonetic event (his book *No. 111* collects instances of the schwa), of every word spoken by Goldsmith in a week (*Soliloquy*), of a taped verbal commentary on every physical movement performed by Goldsmith in a 24-hour period (*Fidget*), or of a copy of *The New York Times* (*Day*). Goldsmith's work is important, interesting, and readable, but neither his practice nor his theory is as rigorous as Cage's. *Fidget*, his best book, is incomplete, because Goldsmith got so drunk in the sixteenth hour of the project that he was later unable to transcribe his slurred verbal commentary on his intoxicated bodily existence; instead of giving a record of the last few hours, the final chapter presents the first chapter in reverse. According to Goldsmith, this failure proves that the project itself is impossible; actually, it proves that Goldsmith was unable to do it. Another artist might not encounter the same problems, and might realise the project more fully, if not perfectly.

The most serious problem for this kind of writing is that it is often a blatant exercise in taste-making. Cage always makes interventions in canonical modernist masterpieces by writers he personally admires; when he writes 'through' Joyce and Pound, he is also identifying with them, channelling them, going inside their heads, or trying to. The 'writing through' projects thus become inadvertent portraits of great modern artists, as well as self-portraits insofar as they are expressions of personal appreciation. Cage's use of Joyce to authorize his practice as a writer is particularly egregious and almost delusional. The aesthetic ideal implied by a novel such as *Finnegans Wake* would seem to be the exact opposite of the chance aesthetic: a book in which every available space has been marked, and in which the smallest mark reflects a coherent intention. Goldsmith's *Fidget* has a similar problem, in that it takes place on June 16 – in other words, 'Bloomsday', the day Joyce describes in *Ulysses*. This coincidence effectively recasts Goldsmith's external monologue as an experiment in stream-of-consciousness writing; it also signals an impasse

for conceptual writers who keep returning, as if by compulsion, to Joyce as a model. These problems, however, present opportunities for future writers.

Jackson Mac Low, originally Cage's student, is more various in his use of chance- and intention-based writing procedures; his poetry is alternately spontaneous, planned, machine-assisted, personal, notational, performative, mesostic, and diastic. Some of Mac Low's writings are based on word lists generated randomly by computer programmes; his intervention as a poet is then to recognise the poem delivered by the machine. Mac Low is also somewhat more realistic than Cage in his claims for non-intention. In interviews and statements, Mac Low always insisted that poets can't get away from intention regardless of the formal procedures they're following, because 'the ego is implicit in everything you do' (Bezner 1993: 110). Mac Low thus supports Sol LeWitt's point that art can't exist without the exertion of some control.

Which brings us back to the beginning. As a poet, you have three kinds of decisions to make: selection (why this word rather than some other word?), order (why this word before the next word?), and division (what is the compositional unit – the word, the line, the fragment, the sentence? What marks the boundary between units?). We will consider each of these sites for decision-making in turn.

Vocabulary

Here is a simple way of thinking about poetry: a poem is a list of words. Slightly more complicated: a poem is an attempt to define one word (that is, the poem is still a list, but some of the words on the list are more important than others). Even more complicated: a poem creates a community in which its language is the only one. Only these words can be spoken in the space of this poem. Or finally: the words themselves are the community. Modern poets tend to insist on one of these formulations. In *A Textbook of Poetry*, Jack Spicer says that a poem first establishes a vocabulary, takes a cut out of the English language, then says: 'Imagine this as lyric poetry' (Spicer 1975: 177). Similarly, William Carlos Williams: 'A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words' (Williams 1988: 54). And Stéphane Mallarmé: 'Poems are made of words, not ideas' (Mallarmé 1956: 145).

Poets who insist on words as materials are making a claim about medium specificity. The project is to say what can only be said in the form of a poem and can't be said in the form of a painting, novel, film, dance, etc. Is there such a thing as medium specificity? Not insofar as poetry is conceived as a technology of representation. If a poem can describe a film or a painting (the technical name for this kind of mixed-media image-making is 'ekphrasis'), it can include anything that the film or painting might do. Any medium of representation is always capable of including and outflanking all the others. If, however, you are committed to object specificity as well as medium specificity, representation is not an issue, because you assume that the replacement of any object (such as a film or painting) with a convenient image (in the form of a poem, say) is going to fail, or, in any case, is morally wrong.

Many poetic revolutions have been founded on vocabulary. In their *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge make a theoretical claim for ordinary language (not 'plain language' but 'scenes from common life . . . in a selection of language really used by men') as a useful, interesting material for poetry (Wordsworth 1984: 596–7). Whether any of the poems collected in *Lyrical Ballads* actually uses such a language is debatable. In the modern period, Ezra Pound makes a different claim for ordinary language as opposed to literary language (for example, words that appear only in poems, such as 'eglantine') in

the name of clarity. The principle is '*nothing* that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, *actually say*' (Kenner 1971: 81). For Pound, ordinary language is not valuable because it is the language of a particular class (Wordsworth's 'common life') but because it effectively communicates ideas and experiences. In the 1950s and 1960s, Barbara Guest put 'eglantine' and other super-literary words back into circulation. Such flagrant archaisms are a signal of the expansive vocabulary available to New York School poets: Guest reserves the right to use any word she wants. This expansiveness is thematised and exemplified in the flat, prosaic diction and syntax of John Ashbery's *Three Poems*. The book begins by distinguishing between two compositional practices: 'I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way'. Ashbery then gives some examples of leaving out: 'clean-washed sea/ the flowers were' (Ashbery 1972: 3–4). 'Leaving out', then, is the exclusive, artificial language that marks a boundary around poetry. With eyes fully open to the implications of his decision, Ashbery dedicates himself to what he has identified as the less true way – the use of a language that does not draw attention to itself as poetic.

Other poets work valiantly to expand their vocabulary beyond the personal – see, for example, Tom Raworth's poem 'Sixty Words I've Never Used Before' (Raworth 1999: 10–12). Perhaps the greatest vocabulary in all new poetries is that of Clark Coolidge. For Coolidge, the very fact that a poem has a vocabulary is a deplorable expression of human finitude. It is unfortunately impossible to have all experiences, to be all persons in history, to know every language; it is impossible even to use all the words in one's native language. Most people, poets included, use a few words, a tiny piece of English, over and over, in every conversation and in every poem. Poets normally respond to this fact by ignoring it or by inventing a poetic persona which becomes an emblem for a different language. Coolidge responds, first, by ransacking dictionaries to find new, unfamiliar materials for poems. Coolidge also carries out these investigations on a micro-level in books such as *Ing*, where division occurs below the level of the individual word, allowing part-words such as 'ing' and 'ness' to become bearers of meaning.

Excursus on plagiarism

One essential formal feature in new poetries is collage, which means that the compositional unit is not the individual word (or something smaller, such as a part-word), but a larger prefabricated language piece often called a fragment. The term 'fragment' could imply that the unit is grammatically incomplete or miniature in scale, but this is not necessarily the case; the fragment can be a phrase, a line, a sentence, a paragraph, etc. In poetics, its actual valences are:

- the fragment has another context outside of the poem;
- the edges of the fragment are not coextensive with those of the poem.

We will consider the problem of the fragment's edginess later (under 'Syntax' and 'Measure'). Here we are concerned with the problem of the fragment's original context, a problem sometimes identified as appropriation, and sometimes, more bluntly, as plagiarism.

To whom do words belong? Montaigne: 'I myself am the substance of my book'. Rimbaud: '"I" is an other'. Both of these quotations occur, unattributed, in Walter Abish's book 99: *The New Meaning*, a collection of sentences and paragraphs copied from other

books and arranged, or as Abish says 'orchestrated', to give them a new meaning (Abish 1990: 9, 16). (The title piece takes passages from the ninety-nineth page of ninety-nine different books.) If the three kinds of decisions writers have to make are selection, division, and order, Abish has tried to limit his decision-making, as much as possible, to order. Although he gives no author citations for any of the passages, he is careful to give an exact word count for each one.

The Montaigne and Rimbaud quotations may be understood as the conceptual limits of his project. Both are statements about how the person relates to writing. Montaigne, whose essays grow out of short tags copied from ancient poetry, identifies with the materials of writing. This writing, this ancient poetry, is Montaigne. Rimbaud, on the other hand, is alienated from the materials of writing as he receives them. The language is contaminated by other voices on the most elemental level. Even the personal pronoun 'I' is useless; Rimbaud will have to invent a new term to designate himself. The only completely satisfying solution would be to invent a new language every time he sits down to write.

The quotation marks inside the Rimbaud quotation tell a different story. They are intended as a distancing device. They mean: that isn't my word. That isn't my voice. That isn't me. Are the quotation marks enough of a shield to protect Rimbaud from what this sentence is actually saying? Is the disagreement between subject and verb, a grammatical error, enough of a shield? The words of the sentence may be too close to be entirely detached from one another and from the writer. The meaning of the sentence finally cuts across boundaries imposed by punctuation and grammar.

In the Montaigne sentence, on the other hand, the subject is not as stable as it wants to be. It is curiously doubled: 'I myself'. The 'myself' is redundant. It's there only for emphasis. But its presence suggests a problem: Montaigne isn't exactly the substance of his book. The book doesn't even look like him. The distance from 'I' to 'my book' is a full sentence. That distance could be bridged to an extent; the relation could be expressed as 'I = book' or Ibook or boIok. But there will always be some distance between Montaigne and what he writes, just as there's a necessary distance between 'I' and 'myself'. They are different words.

The positions that Montaigne and Rimbaud want to occupy are impossible. They are theatrical performances of absolute proximity and absolute distance. Abish manages to include both of them in one piece 'What Else', an arrangement of sentences and paragraphs that he describes in a prefatory note as his 'pseudo-European autobiography', in that the sentences are all written in the first-person singular. In 'What Else' the word 'I' is a lie. It conceals many voices, many unnamed authors. We know this much from the preface. But we can't help putting it together anyway – constructing a character, a personality, a life story, out of the fragments. And we also know that the 'I' isn't entirely a lie. There is an organising intelligence behind this anthology. 'What Else' is a personal record of a lifetime of reading. A person selected these passages and put them in order. Isn't that always what we do when we write? We select words – which, usually, we didn't invent – and arrange them. Abish is just using larger language pieces – complete sentences and paragraphs.

Can 'I' ever be a lie? 'I', the personal pronoun, the word we use to designate ourselves, the word that we identify with at the most profound level, doesn't belong to anyone. Everyone says 'I'. We are all part of it. Abish is manufacturing an autobiography that anyone could have, making himself anonymous, flattening his own 'I' against an unnamed, faceless European past. Acts of literary collage, such as Abish's, are incorrectly described

as theft, appropriation, plagiarism. Collage is really about letting go, becoming another person, in the same way that we become other people when we read books.

Syntax

Collage procedures usually do not involve a laborious or painstaking selection process. Finding fragments to use as materials is not much more difficult than recognising a poem delivered by one of Jackson Mac Low's word generating programmes. Instead, collage puts pressure on the other sites of decision: order (what principle determines the arrangement of the fragments?) and division (what principle determines the boundaries of the fragment?). To understand the issues involved in ordering a composition, it may help to adopt or at least consider some more precise definitions of our terms.

Collage is sometimes used as a synonym for montage, but sometimes is opposed to montage. Strictly speaking, collage may designate only the introduction of fragments from other media. Thus, a poem becomes a collage when it incorporates drawings, photographs, newspaper clippings, labels ripped from cans, jars, and bottles, etc. The precise name for a poem that incorporates only pieces of other texts is montage.

However, the terms collage and montage are also sometimes used to make another useful distinction: collage designates a spatial arrangement of fragments for visual effect; montage designates the arrangement of fragments in chronological sequence (that is, the order of the pieces is the order in which they should be read). Finally, montage is sometimes thought to have a special political significance because of its association with photography. In Soviet constructivist film theory (most notably that of Sergei Eisenstein), montage gives viewers power to interpret images actively. Presented with two images that have been edited together, the viewer creates a new, third image to connect them. In a similar spirit, the German photomontage artist John Heartfield claimed, falsely, that the etymology for montage is from 'Montour' (or 'factory worker'), implying that the act of assembling photographic images is equivalent to production on an assembly line.

These precise definitions may not be satisfactory in that they are not congruent among themselves and not universally agreed-upon. However, the distinctions they make are extremely useful. Consider the first one, which is based on medium specificity. The introduction of a fragment from a different medium (collage in the strict sense) announces the embeddedness of the fragment in another context, but the introduction of a fragment from the same medium (montage in the strict sense) does not. A flower pasted into a poem clearly originated elsewhere, but a description of a flower, regardless of whether it's quoted from another text, looks about the same as the other words in the poem. The distinction is crucial. In the work of some writers, the syntax emphasises the prior embeddedness of the fragments in another context. For example, Marianne Moore usually puts quotation marks around fragments to show that someone else is speaking, and gives bibliographical information to show where the fragments came from, giving an overall impression of polyvocality. This sharp use of collage also emphasises the difficulty of writing itself, the labour of the artist who puts the pieces together. Other writers who use fragments arrange them so that they present a relatively seamless surface, with narrative, thematic, and stylistic coherence. For example, T. S. Eliot's 'The Journey of the Magi' incorporates phrases and images from a variety of poems, sermons, and memoirs, but the poem is presented as a univocal performance. (The 'different voices' of *The Waste Land* are presented more crisply.)

This distinction becomes even more interesting when it is politicised, as it spectacularly is in Language writing, a poetic and intellectual movement from the 1970s and 1980s.

The Language writers are radical formalists in their deployment of a broad range of formal devices, their sense that whatever a poem does is its form; in their tendency to make formal devices visible in their writing (the meta-device called 'estrangement' in Russian formalism and 'alienation' in Brecht's 'epic theatre'); and in their insistence that poetic form has political effects. (The earlier Objectivist poets – Zukofsky, Oppen, Niedecker, and others – whom the Language writers frequently claim as models are equally committed to a radical politics and to formal experimentation in poetry, but not to their co-articulation; instead, they insist on the separation of political and poetic activities. Thus, George Oppen did his most effective work as a labour organiser during the decades when he was not writing poetry.) The political effects are explained in Charles Bernstein's lucid essay in verse 'Artifice of Absorption'. Synthesising the poetic theory of Veronica Forrest-Thomson and the art history of Michael Fried, Bernstein distinguishes between poems that conceal artifice, pretending to ignore their readers in order to absorb them more effectively into an imaginary world; and poems that foreground artifice, challenging their readers with difficult interpretive problems. The first kind of writing is escapist fantasy; the second kind encourages readers to become active participants in the construction of meaning, and also, perhaps, to become more alert in their engagement with other cultural and social objects.

I have written elsewhere that this is a rather weak and unappealing way of giving power to readers, and that readers always have the option of aggressive reading tactics, regardless of whether they are reading Language poetry or confessional poetry or the newspaper, because texts do not set limits on our ability to interpret them. (For an illustration, see the exercise 'Page from a Tale' below.) However, I agree that formal decisions have political consequences. In fact, poetic form is only interesting insofar as it produces a social relation or an image of one. Form can produce a social relation rhetorically (for example, a poet uses a formal device to have an effect on the minds and bodies of readers) or it can define a community of people who have read the same poems or write in similar forms, such as the Language writers. Form can also be understood as political allegory; however, any form is capable of several allegorical interpretations. For Pope, the closed couplet indicates an enlightened community in which people live in harmony and their knowledge can be externalised, grasped, and transferred to others. For Milton, the closed couplet indicates an imposed order that should be resisted. For Bernstein, the artificiality of the closed couplet represents a deliberate refusal of an unseen order imposed on ordinary language; the couplet helps to make that order visible, and thus is a useful tool for resisting it.

The Language writers attribute special political significance to parataxis, a syntax in which compositional units (typically not verse lines but sentences, or, in Ron Silliman's terminology, 'new sentences') are sequenced without implying chronology (one thing happens before another), etiology (one thing happens because of another thing or so that another thing can happen), or hierarchy (one thing is more important or more valuable than some other thing); without conventional transitions or other connective material; or (a device learned from Ashbery) with misleading connective material – for example, a non sequitur beginning 'Therefore . . .' or 'And yet . . .' Here is an example from Carla Harryman's 1987 collection *Vice*. As often happens in Language writing, this example both performs and theorises parataxis:

> Twenty-five years later the words that had passed between them were unalterably compromised by everything they had come to know in the meantime.
> I believe in an order that does not exist, will never exist, and that one must seek in order to preclude its existence. The impulse of the painting I have turned you around in is dissatisfied

with a place to go – so as not to have been here, we have come up with a monochrome by which your remarks are masked.

Here, syntax is initially a spatial relation, one that occurs on the page between two sentences or paragraphs; then, a psychological one that occurs in the distance 'between' people; then, a historical one that occurs across time ('twenty-five years later'); finally, an artistic one, in which the first-person singular commits to a self-defeating search for order so that it 'will never exist'. This kind of writing is sometimes called 'disjunctive', but the only disjoining going on here is my own act of quoting this passage apart from the context of Harryman's book. Her work might be described more accurately as conjunctive, in that she proceeds by conjoining language pieces paratactically. It is also conjunctive in its wish to provoke a new social organisation.

Excursus on repetition

In his late autobiographical statement on poetics *A Vision*, Yeats describes the experience of reading Pound's first drafts of *The Cantos*. Yeats immediately recognises the structure as one of theme-and-variations. Instead of progressing toward a goal, the development of the poem is recursive. The compositional elements of this 'poem including history' are historical fragments arranged ahistorically, producing a flat chronology in which a painter from renaissance Italy can appear to engage a colonial American architect in conversation. Yeats is comfortable with this structure, which he knows from his own work. However, he notes that 'some of the elements' in Pound's long poem 'do not recur', and this failure puzzles and irritates him (Yeats 1966: 4).

What is the significance of the non-recurrent element? Instead of translating people from contingent into absolute reality (as Yeats does in 'Easter, 1916', where the names of the Irish nationalists can be 'written in a verse' only after their bearers have been killed and thereby made efficacious in history), Pound locates value in the contingent: events, people, and things that occur only once in history. For the same reason, Gertrude Stein's highly repetitive writing rejects the possibility of repetition. Each person, thing, and event is different, unique, unrepeatable. You can't repeat a word any more than you can repeat a person. The same word is no longer the same when it occupies a different space.

Few writers have attempted the difficult task of repeating no compositional element, so that there is no consistent narrative, argument, or style, and each step forward is a step into new territory. Lyn Hejinian's early book *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* makes some gestures in this direction. (The title is partly a joke on the difficulty of memorising a poem in which almost nothing is repeated.) Christian Bök makes non-recurrence one of the formal constraints on his progressive lipogram *Eunoia*, each chapter of which uses words with only one vowel; for each vowel, Bök tries to exhaust the available vocabulary and to avoid repeating individual words. Lisa Jarnot embraces repetition as a structuring device, building poems around anaphoric repetitions and distortions of a keyword or phrase. One of Jarnot's characteristic productions is her 'Sea Lyrics', a series of statements centred upon the first-person singular speaking subject that Language writing would like to dismantle. Also worthy of note in this regard is Tan Lin's 'ambient stylistics' project, a perverse response to Bernstein's aesthetic theory that tries to take the literary technology of absorption as far as it can go, in order to produce a writing that would be 'relaxing', environmental, like wallpaper (Lin 2002: 109). Lin pursues this project by taking the materials of popular culture personally – for example, rewriting restaurant reviews, wedding notices,

and obituaries as though they were about him as an individual subject instead of addressed to him as a member of the collective readership of *The New York Times*.

Measure

One of the oldest and most beautiful ideas about poetic form is that it is a system of measurement. Specifically, the line measures. What does it measure? The traditional answer is time. In classical prosody, you're measuring time in units called long and short syllables that have precise lengths. Because it measures time, this kind of poetic line also implicitly measures human life. It may also be thought to regulate, therefore to institute or control time, to stop time, or to shield objects from the effects of time. As in Shakespeare's Sonnet 15: 'And all in war with time for love of you,/ As he takes from you, I engraft you new', whatever the speaker might mean by 'engraft'. Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* is an unusual example of a prose poem in which the compositional unit, the sentence, measures time – not the time it takes to say the sentence, which is not precisely regulated, but a year. The number of sentences per paragraph is the number of years Hejinian has lived at the moment of composition as well as the number of paragraphs in the book. (Hejinian first wrote *My Life* at age thirty-seven; then revised it according to its own internal logic at age forty-six, adding sentences to each paragraph to close the gap; then invented a new time regulation system for the most recent sequel *My Life in the Nineties*.) Miles Champion's poetry does not measure time notationally, but time becomes an issue because of his reading speed, which is just at the limit of intelligibility. Champion writes slowly but reads very fast; each line is thus subjected to intense dilation in time at the moment of composition, then contraction in time at the moment of performance. The result is a postmodern version of sublime: an aesthetic experience that almost outstrips one's capacity to enjoy it because it happens too quickly.

'Time' is still a very good answer to the question of what poems measure. The typical, modern, vernacular answer is voice. In traditional English prosody, you're measuring voice in units called long and short syllables that bear a precise stress. It might not sound as though very much is at stake in the modern conception. Time sounds like a profound concept; accent doesn't, maybe because everyone has a distinct accent. No one speaks exactly the same English, no one puts stress in the same places or pronounces a stressed syllable in the same way, or not all the time. But that's what makes the reduction of voice – of a particular, accented voice – to a uniform, abstract pattern so ambitious. The project of measuring accent is really a wish for a universal language, and, beyond that, a common world. There's a poem by the nineteenth-century German poet Christian Morganstern in which only the title, which translates as 'Fishes' Nightsong', is in German; the rest of the poem is written in accent marks. When you diagram voice as a pulse, human language looks the same as fish language.

After the twentieth century, there are many possible answers to this question. For example: for the Black Mountain poets (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and others), the line measures breath, which could mean that the end of the line marks the assumed limit of the speaker's lung capacity, or that the line break is notational, marking a place where a reader would be expected to pause. The line in Zukofsky's poetry often has a consistent word count, so something is measured, but the measure is not universalised; the word count has a private numerological significance for Zukofsky and does not regulate time or voice. The implication of Zukofsky's frequent practice of homophonic translation – re-articulating foreign poems to make them sound English – is the same: the rules governing the behaviour of the voice are private. Zukofsky himself is the measure.

Other poets reject the impulse to measure, which is considered inaccurate at best (because time and voice are not fully accessible to one person), violent at worst (because measurement is thought to introduce divisions in nature that were not previously there). The various marks of division in Leslie Scalapino's writing – which include, but are not limited to, dashes, brackets, and quotation marks – and their tendency to occur at unpredictable intervals and to interrupt line units and grammatical units, may indicate the co-presence of several measuring systems, or an effort to reject measurement altogether. For example:

> so the man – as gentle – for
> causing the fine – in that situation of
> being on the subway – when the cop
> had begun to
> bully him – at its inception
>
>   and – a senseless
>   relation of the
>   public figure – to his
>   dying from age – having that
>   in the present – as him to us
>
> as is my
> relation to the mugger – a
> boy – coming up behind
> us – grabbing the other woman's
> purse – in his running into the park

By contrast, the marks of division in Alice Notley's poetry represent a traditional voice regulation project. The quotation marks in *The Descent of Alette* represent the presence of different voices and the fact that Notley is alienated by any language that she did not invent herself; the spaces and ellipses in *Close to Me and Closer . . . the Language of Heaven*, indicate the voice of a particular speaker, Notley's father: 'you will be given a strange gift/ a number no one has seen before/ the number [unrepresentable]// the magic number . . . ness'.

Final excursus on the page

The father in *Close to Me* who presents 'a number no one has seen before' is proposing a new prosody in which divisions occur below the level of the individual word – so that 'ness', for example, becomes a complete unit – but using the language of traditional prosody. As in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*: 'But most by Numbers judge a Poet's Song,/ And smooth or rough, with them, is right or wrong' (337–8). 'Numbers' here means the tendency of prosody to reduce a specific grouping of words to a universal, abstract pattern. The sound of the words becomes a diagram. The term 'numbers' has the same meaning in baseball, where every player and every action can be replaced by a number or a long list of numbers. It's one of the three or four things that baseball players are allowed to say in interviews: 'I'm not thinking about my numbers, I'm just glad that my team got the win'. For Pope, the function of the numbers is rhetorical: 'The Sound must seem an echo to the Sense' (365). Here, the relation between form and content is redundant. Formal devices are always bearers of meaning, and their meaning is always the same as the semantic content of the line. Thus, a line that describes 'a smooth stream' is enacted 'in smoother

Numbers' (367). The numbers function to reinforce, below the level of literacy, a meaning already in the words.

The radical formalism of some new poetry links poetic form to social organisation by analogy, exactly as in Pope. However, other new poetries are committed to formal properties that exceed the production of meaning, so that the relationship between form and content is one of tension rather than redundancy; the sound effects may have a meaning different from or opposite to the semantic content, or they may be conceived as purely formal and meaningless. Susan Howe's poem 'A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike' provides examples of all of these tendencies. The graphic eccentricities in Howe's writing are sometimes used as political emblems (for example, a line that can only be read intelligibly when the page is oriented differently, which may signify resistance to convention), sometimes as notation for vocal performance (so that different typographic conventions represent distinct voices or characters), sometimes as purely visual objects (for example, lines crossing each one another or printed directly on top of one another so that they become illegible). Here, the page becomes a field or canvas. It may include notations for sound effects, but its most interesting formal properties are based in sight rather than sound. Unfortunately, prosody has no vocabulary for naming or measuring visual effects.

I want to conclude by recalling two other uses of the page in new poetries that may be productive sites for future work. Ronald Johnson's *RADI OS* is a poem based on the first four books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Most of the words have been removed, and are represented by Johnson as white space; the remaining words take their positions from an 1894 edition of Milton. Johnson uses Milton, and a nineteenth-century editor, to make all of the decisions in the area of order (the sequence of the words is that of *Paradise Lost*), and most of the decisions in the area of selection (the words are chosen by Milton) and division (the page layout is determined by the nineteenth-century editor). He only allows himself to make negative decisions about selection and division; as he puts it, 'I composed the holes'. A related project from roughly the same period is Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, described by the author as a 'treated Victorian novel'. Phillips performs extraordinary interventions on H. R. Mallock's novel *A Human Document*, drawing and painting over the pages to make most of the original text illegible, drawing 'channels' or 'rivers' of space between words and phrases to create a new syntax among the remaining islands of legible text, combining pieces of text from several pages into one page, and introducing new divisions above and below the level of the individual word to form new contractions and compound words (for example, the hero of the first edition of *A Humument* is a figure named 'Toge', a word that appears nowhere in Mallock's novel). The only rule for these interventions is that the collage has to be internal. Johnson's and Phillips's books are inspiring not just because of what they achieve but also because of their limitations. Although Phillips is primarily a visual artist, *A Humument* is more interesting as a verbal composition than as a visual one. The visual interventions are mainly illustrational – for example, a text piece naming or describing 'steps' is laid out by Phillips as a set of steps. Future writers may be interested in exploring the possibility of stronger tensions between text and image.

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Exercises

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'Page from a Tale'

A group of people divide a text between them so that everyone has a page. (If there are ten people, the text should be ten pages long.) Each person reads the assigned page carefully and becomes an expert on it. The text thus is divided over the consciousness of

the entire group. The group then meets to reconstruct the complete text based on their shared knowledge.

The point of this experiment in reading is that any idea you have about a text is a reading of that text. On any page, there are energies of many kinds, possibilities for many different continuations, which tend to disappear when you put the page together with others. Reading is normally conceived as a process of imposing control on the disparate energies of the page, making the words line up so that they all appear to be saying the same thing. This exercise is a way of articulating the possible continuations before they disappear.

This exercise can also be used as a germ for a series of writing exercises based on the assigned page. For example: write a poem using only words from your page; or write a poem without using any of the words from your page; isolate the textures on your page and write a poem with them; circle all words containing the letter 's', draw lines between them, and write a poem about the resulting constellation; write a poem by crossing out words on the page.

Another reading experiment
Put this book under your pillow and sleep on it. Or, if you can't sleep with the book under your pillow, read the book continuously until it puts you to sleep. Then write a poem based on your dream.

This exercise is based on Carl Jung's analysis of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is actually an analysis of the dream Jung had after falling asleep over the novel.

'Inverted sonnet'
Write a fourteen-line poem in which the first word in every line is a rhyme-word from a sonnet.

'Reducing the sauce'
Write a poem. Write another poem by removing most of the words from the first poem. Write a third poem by removing most of the words from the second poem. Write a fourth poem by paraphrasing the third poem (not using any of the words from the first poem).

Other ways of reducing the sauce. Remove all the people from a poem. Remove every trace of human civilisation from a poem. Write a resumé of the people who appear in a poem and comment on their actions (morally, intellectually, aesthetically, personally). Write a review of a poem that you would like to write. Write a rejection letter for a poem you would like to write. Determine the keywords in a poem; write a glossary for them. Imagine that a censor will go over everything you write and remove certain references (to sex, politics, religion, and technology); rewrite your poem so that it can be submitted to the censor.

'The lost suitcase'
Reconstruct the life of a person based on the contents of a suitcase.

'Physical symptoms'
Write 'automatically' – in other words, making a direct connection between your unconscious and your hand, if such a thing were possible. After five minutes, switch hands and continue writing. (If you're right-handed, switch to your left hand; if you're left-handed, switch to your right; if you favour neither hand, put the writing instrument in your mouth, hold it between your toes, or close your eyes).

The point of this exercise is that when you write, you have a body. This is also the case when you read – the best way to remember the second point is by placing the book at a distance slightly greater than your comfortable reading distance. Writing and reading are normally conceived as the elimination of physical awareness and confrontation.

Exercises in confrontation

Write a poem that will make readers laugh. Write a poem that will make readers cry. Write a poem that will disgust readers, nauseate them or make them throw up. Write a poem that will arouse readers. Write a poem that will put readers to sleep. Write a poem that will cause readers to commit violent acts (such as: fall out of their chairs, throw your poem out the window, tear the poem into bits, etc.). Write a poem that will make readers hungry. Write a poem that will make readers sweat.

Write a description of an action that can be read in the time it would take to complete the action. Write an abbreviated description of an extended action. Reverse the chronology of the action. Reduce the action to its smallest components. Write about everything that happens prior to or following the action. Write a scene in which all actions are facilitated by servants.

'Blow Up'

Write three pictorial descriptions of an action or event: one from inside the event, where you experience everything as it happens without being able to predict where it's coming from or explain why it's happening; one from directly outside the event, where you see and understand everything that happens but are either powerless to stop it or enjoying it too much to want to stop it; one in which the event is in the background and you are unaware of what's happening or its significance for you.

'Blow Out'

1. As above, write three descriptions of an action or event relying exclusively on the sounds attendant to the scene or produced by it.
2. Write a poem in which words are used for sound value rather than semantic value.

'Memory palace'

Use lines from a poem to memorise a set of facts or instructions. Then use those lines to write a new poem about their new subject.

Monetary value

1. Put a monetary value on different parts of speech. Or put a monetary value on particular words. (You can imagine either that this is how much you will have to pay in order to use the word, or that a reader will pay more for certain words than others.) Now write a poem.
2. Put a monetary value on each line in a poem (as on a restaurant menu).
3. Write a poem using only numerals.

'Restraining order'

1. Write a poem in which there are five people; no more than one person can be named in a line; no two people can come within 100 feet of one another. Or write a poem in which five people are introduced in the first line. Or write a poem whose referents are limited to a ten-foot square space.

2. Write a poem in which there is only one object: a chair. Now write a poem about a universe in which there are two objects: chair and pencil. Now write a poem with chair, pencil, and umbrella. Finally, add a newspaper. (The newspaper allows you to do pretty much anything, because it is not just an object but also a technology of representation. Any object that can be represented in the newspaper can also be represented in the poem.) Questions to ask about objects. What does it look like? What physical properties does it have? How does it take up space? How does it appeal to senses other than vision? How does it relate to the human body – can you pick it up, is it constructed to accommodate your body in any way, does it resemble a human body? How does it relate to other objects? What activities can be performed with this object (including, but not limited to, the activities for which it was designed)?
3. Rewrite a poem so that people and things can be seen only from behind.
4. Take three sentences and distribute them over three pages, adding words, pictures, doodles, glosses, etc. There should be at least two significant graphic interventions on every page.
5. Write a poem about an abstract concept in which you substitute the homophonous name of a concrete substantive for the name of the concept (for example, 'bowtie' for 'beauty').
6. Write a poem that exactly copies the cadences of another poem.
7. Write a poem that can only communicate by quoting another poem (or song, novel, movie, etc.).
8. Write a poem that re-enacts another poem (knowingly, ritualistically, or against its will).
9. Derive a vocabulary from a poem; use the vocabulary to write a new poem.
10. Translate a poem into another vocabulary, keeping as close as possible to the paraphraseable content of the original.
11. Invent a new language and write a poem in it.

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